

Italian market gardeners oral history project

Interview with Johnny Tormena OH872/18

recorded by Madeleine Regan

on 25 May 2012, at Bellevue Heights, South Australia

OH: Thank you Johnny for agreeing to this interview.

JT: A pleasure.

OH: Johnny I'm going to start by asking you some questions about your background. Could you give me your full name please?

JT: Giovanni Tormena

OH: And what is your date of birth?

JT: 29th November, 1927.

OH: Johnny were you named for anyone in your family?

JT: Yes, Giovanni was my grandfather's name on my father's side who I never met because he died before the First World War and I was born in '27 so I never met him.

OH: (01:07) And can you tell me a little about your parents. What were their names?

JT: My father's name was Galliano Tormena. He's, he has a brother and three sisters who have all passed away, the three sisters. My mother's name was Severina Rossetto and they were all born in Bigolino.

OH: Can you tell me because you were born also in Bigolino?

JT: Yes, was born in Bigolino, yes.

OH: Can you tell me the location, where that is?

JT: Bigolino is five kilometres from Valdobbiadene which is our *comune*, *provincia di Treviso*. That mightn't mean much to many people but that's a village that is exactly 50 minutes bus ride from Venice.

OH: (02:24) And what's the area like around Bigolino?

JT: I love it and I go back to it as much as I can although I get accused by friends that I used to go with school over there, whom, lately, the last time that I went in there, I think I've lost the last one Now I'm the only survivor of friends that I had and I get accused and say "You're here again". And I said yes, you know "Now that you're retired why don't you come back and live here?" And I said "Oh, no". I said, you know. But he said, "You come over here often." And I said "Yes." He said, "Why?" I said "Because I was born here." I have beautiful memories, I left

here when I was 12 years old. I have great memories of the place and every time I come back, I relive those memories. But after 70 years in Australia there's no way [laughs] that I could come back at this age now.

OH: (03:34) And going back to your parents, Johnny, what were they doing at the time that you were born in 1927?

JT: Oh well, my father was I think in Italy they call it a *carrettierie*. He had two horses and he used to pick up goods from the main railway stations like our closest one was Cornuda and that he would go as far as Vicenza and Padova and like and pick up goods for people that were running business around our area around our *comune*.

OH: How far would Vicenza and Padova be from Bigolino?

JT: Right, well Vicenza is approximately 50 kilometres, I think, by memory, Bigolino was 50 kilometres from Vicenza, 50 from Padova, 60 from Venezia, 20 from our *comune*, Treviso.

OH: So quite a central area?

JT: Yes, and we have some very interesting locations around it.

OH: (05:07) And what do you remember about growing up in Bigolino?

JT: Oh gee... I grew up that once from an early age, from when I was about six or seven, I used to sleep with my grandmother, she was a widow and I used to sleep with her and I very much remember asking her things about the old days and how she grew up and about the first world war and what had happened and all those things. And I've got vivid memories of all the things she used to tell me. And I used to repeatedly ask her and she must have been sick and tired of answering the same questions. She was a dear old lady I remember, and I really missed her when she passed away, I was about --- she passed away in 1936 so I would have been nine years old and I missed her because by that time I had to sleep by myself and I had nobody to talk to.
[laughs]

OH: (06:29) When you were growing up, what was your house like?

JT: Well, the house was, it was, a group of houses and at the end of the *cortile*, that they called it...

OH: The *cortile* is like a..?

JT: The *cortile* is like a yard, the end of the backyard and ended up to where the stables were, that's where the livestock were, all the cows, where they milked the cows where Dad kept the horses and all that. And ... there was a long building of two three stories, actually and by what I remember, I vaguely remember that when they decided, they divided the houses because it was my father's what would it be, my father's uncle and my father's father that they were related and so there was about four or five families altogether as they grew up and they decide to divide up and we ended up with part of this block of houses and living quarters and I remember very well, a period it must have been 1937, '38 when we had a group of soldiers that came from Sicily and Calabria and down that way that they had to do their army, there was compulsory army training

and they used to come up there and so the government went around looking for places to put them in and we had like the second floor upstairs where we used to keep all the grain, the wheat, and alright. And it was out of season, so that was empty so we allowed them to sleep up there. And at night the soldiers when they finished all their training and everything they used to sit outside while they were cleaning their boots and things like that and they used to start singing and they would sing all these --- *Mazzolin di fiori* and all like that, you know. And I've got vivid memories of that. Very much. I loved it.

OH: An interesting time for a young boy to have that experience?

JT: I loved it. When I think back now and young ones today that they say that they get bored ... you see, us kids at that time we were doing chores, to do, apart from school and your homework that you had to do, you had to clean the stable, you had to go and pick wild radishes to feed the rabbits and the chooks and all that sort of stuff. And it wasn't that I was singled out, that was a way of life, you know. All my mates had to do the same thing. And of course, we used to cheat, [laughs] in between. I mean, I remember Dad when he used to go away and he'd say, "Now don't forget to clean the stable, to get the stable clean", like that, you know. But on my way home from school a group of us, we'd start and we'd play a game, playing marbles and things like that and it wasn't until I could hear the horses' hoofs coming from the piazza that I'd think, "Oh my God!" I hadn't cleaned the stables and I'd run home and rush through. I think I didn't get it very often but I'd get a kick in the backside, you know because Dad would have been tired at that time and he couldn't put the horses to bed because I hadn't finished cleaning the stable.

OH: So you had some chores that you had to do.

(11:06) When your grandmother spoke to you about events such as World War I, what kind of things did she tell you, Johnny?

JT: Well, she used to tell me ... because the house we were living was bombed, half of it was blown down, you know. So she used to say, "You know where the fireplace is? Well that was all bombed, the wall had fallen out." Like that, you know. Ah, she used to tell me that when they had to leave the place because the enemies were coming in and my great ... nearest towns where the enemy wasn't there but periodically they would try and sneak back to see what had happened and I remember that three days later, my grandmother went back to have a look and told us that she found the houses had been bombed and all like that. And I used to, my mind used to work overtime picturing what she, what the family was going through. I'm a bit of a romantic, I think, you know. [laughs]

OH: Do you know how long it took to restore the damage after World War I? Like was there an effect?

JT: I don't remember whether I asked her that how long did it take because --- at that time that I was asking, all that was built and all like that, you see. So it was bombed during the '15 -'18 and I was born in 1927 so in that period of time, they jazzed it all up, liveable, I grew up in it. Yes.

OH: And when you were growing up, what was Bigolino like? Was it a big village?

JT: Well, to me it was big. It had a piazza, it had a beautiful big fountain in the front and ---. I couldn't judge it from anything else because I had never been out of it.

OH: (13:45) And did you go to school in the village?

JT: Yes, yeah, I vaguely remember going to kindergarten that they call *it l'asilo*. And then from there when I was too old for *l'asilo* and I had to go to *the scuole comunale*, that they call it.

OH: Like is that the primary school?

JT: The primary school, like Grade 1 and Grade 2 and all that, you know.

(14:17) And there was a time there when my grandmother had passed away and my Dad had the horses and sometimes he'd be away even overnight because he would with the horse to go to Vicenza and all those places, you know. And somehow or other I was fascinated with the thought, that he would fall asleep in the cart that he was on but the horses knew their way, where he was going and where he was coming. And I was fascinated with that, you know. And my mother used to work in a silk cocoon factory, they used to call it *la filanda*, that's where they get the silk cocoons and they process it and turn it into silk and things like that, you know. And that was at Valdobbiadene which was five kilometres away. She had four other friends, so there were five friends and they used to meet just outside the village piazza and walked their way up and walked their way back, you know.

(15:28) And I was given --- there was chores that I was told that I had to do before they came home. So my chores that I remember very well was that when my grandmother passed away, all the little chores that she used to do apart from cooking, I couldn't do the cooking and all that, but all the chores that she had to do like feeding the chickens and cleaning the house and getting us breakfast like that came over to me. So in the morning Mum used to set the coffee up for me and all like that to have my breakfast and to feed my sister ...

OH: How much younger was your sister?

JT: Six years younger.

OH: That's Maria?

JT: Yes. She was hard to handle [laughs] and because I had to feed her and then put on her *grembiule*, as they called it, you know. It was like a ... what would you call it? Don't know --- Something over her clothes.

OH: Like a smock?

JT: Yes, a smock. Yes. And it was all because it was their *divisa*¹, as they called it, and I had to feed her and take her to the kindergarten and then go from there into the church to Catechism because you know they used to teach Catechism and come out from Catechism at 9.00 o'clock. And go to the *scuole comunale* and that would go until 12.30 and then at 12.30 I would have to come home and continue all these chores like cleaning the stable and all those sorts of thing.

¹ *Divisa* is the Italian word for uniform

OH: A busy life?

JT: Yes. yes.

OH: (17:35) Johnny, were your parents well off?

JT: No, we never starved but money was scarce. I could understand the ... I could understand the life that both Dad and Mum had to do to bring home cash to put food on the table. But more than once Mum used to say go out and see if you can get some radicchio which in here is like dandelions, yes, *radicchio* and because I don't know and hope that the chickens and see that the chickens don't break the eggs because I can't think of anything else to give you for food tonight, you know, That used to, I used to take that seriously because [laughs] I like my food.

OH: So it sounds like it was quite a tight financial situation?

JT: Yes, it was but I didn't realise that it was that tight because the kids that I was going to school with were going through the same thing. So it's not as if we hard-done by, and my friends were better off.

OH: Do you know why there was that kind of I guess we'd call it poverty?

JT: (19:20) Oh, jobs were hard to get, there wasn't any jobs and like that, you know. Things started to liven up for me and made it a little more interesting at the time that Mussolini came into power. And he attacked the young ones first and gave them uniforms and made them do exercises and have gymnasium and all that and marching and whatever, you know. And that gave us an interest. There was no such thing as kids like when we first came to Australia, that kids my age, every Saturday they would go to the cinema. There was no such thing as cinemas. I remember that the first time I ever saw a movie was *la sagra*², do you know what *la sagra* is? A saint's day, a certain saint's day and there was the village called Vidor which was four kilometres away from our place, and there there was the *sagra* of Saint Giuseppe and I used to get ten cents to spend and ten cents was a lot of money then. And my mother --- they had a cinema, I had never seen, didn't know what a cinema was or what cinema was and it was done in a big large room of where the priest in the village lived and they showed a movie and I always remember it, called 'King Kong' so that ... and I found after I came to Australia that that was made in 1933 so I would have been six years old but I remember seeing it and I was fascinated, you know. And when I came to Australia, they had a revival house here where 'King Kong' came up and I thought, "Oh I'm going to see a bit of my past now." And I went to see it. Fascinating. [laughs]

OH: (21:53) Going back to Bigolino and the region there, what would have made it difficult for people to live well, at that time?

JT: Well, there was two families that no, three actually, that Dad, that kept Dad in business. One was a *falegnameria*,³ you know, he dealt in wood like that, you know and he used to bring wood in and slice it into timber because when I went back to Bigolino after 16/17 years after when I was in my late 20s and I found out that this family was really booming. They used to supply timber to Venice to build all the gondolas and all the ferries that they have like that. So he was a

² *Sagra* translates as festival

³ *Falegnameria* is the Italian name for a joinery or carpenter's workshop

well, I suppose a well-to-do family at the time because there all the locals used to bring their wheat to be processed like all the... I don't know what the word is for that, you know. So --- I didn't know anybody there I don't even remember if they had any kids my age that we used to go to school with there, you know. But I think that was well-to-do family. Then there was another family called Zabra. They used to make wood stoves. And then there was another one that dealt in all hardware, like that. And those three people were good customers of Dad because they used to hire him to go to Venice or Padova or Vicenza to collect whatever they bought or whatever.

That's all I remember because the rest of the families all lived off the land, you know and what they used to grow, and some of them I think would have had a lot of land and they could have sold whatever they grew but most of them lived on they planted their own wheat, their own corn, the potatoes or whatever and they lived off that. And most families also --- used to buy little piglets, you know, and fed it. And at a certain time of the year and I think that was round about the time of the harvest of the corn that they would kill the pig and make sausages and salamis and that was the time that we could eat meat because I remember that Mum sometimes would give me ten cents to go and buy ten cents of tomato, tomato paste to make spaghetti, pasta and spaghetti like that, you know, with ten cents. And sometimes she didn't have ten cents and she would give me two eggs, two eggs to go and get two eggs worth of tomato paste, and things like which is things I only read in books in these days, you know, that I grew up in an era that that was the way to go.

OH: (26:06) And Johnny do you think that there was an influence from the effects of World War I?

JT: Oh?

OH: You know like, was the poverty, in some ways, a result of World War I?

JT: I think so, I've never thought of that way. I mean I was too young to think of why was it that way. But I think it must have been because a lot of the houses you could see were not rebuilt by tradesmen, they were rebuilt by the people themselves and so they didn't have the finish like that. That would have come later or even after the Second World War when they did them up. We never had a toilet, we never had a bathroom. We never had water inside the house. We had to go with buckets, we always had a bucket a *secure* they called it, you know, to make sure, Mum would say go and get a *secure* of water so that she could use for the cooking the washing or whatever or washing up the dishes.

OH: So it was very different kind of conditions?

JT: It was very primitive, you know when I see and used to see some of the westerns here in Australia like that and the settlers that were settling in the land, were doing, that's the way that they lived and that's the way.

OH: (27:48) So I'd like to ask you about the reasons for your parents coming to Australia.

JT: Well, that was a big thing because and it was all because of the Second World War and because of Fascism. Dad was not politics-mad. He just did his job, he just, to bring food on the

table and loved going to the *osteria* and have a glass of wine with his mates and things like that, you know --- and after the first world war in the early '20s when Mussolini showed the power that he came up to --- and he, and the young ones were really for Fascism and what Mussolini was preaching and all of that.

(29:00) But everyone in Mum's family, there were six brothers and three sisters, and the brothers were so anti- that it's not funny, they used to get beaten up for it, you know, because they wouldn't keep their mouth shut, they would voice their opinion to the real fanatical Fascists, they used to get beaten up, they⁴ used to wait outside the *osteria*⁵, all like that, you know. Two of them, because of that, decided to get out of Italy and they migrated to France. They were away for, I think, a couple of years and they came back thinking that things would have died down but instead it was getting stronger, and again they would get beaten up and when the Fascists saw that they couldn't tame them or get them to think their way, they started to pick on my grandfather, and they caught him one time and put a funnel in his mouth and poured castor oil down his throat. And when they saw that, they said, "Okay we defend ourselves but now we're a danger to our father, we either got to shut up or get out."

(30:26) And at the time, so I hear, Australia was looking for unskilled labour. You didn't have to be nominated by somebody like you do these days or you do in our time and so they enquired of it and three of the brothers came away together.

OH: Which brothers were they?

JT: That was Domenico, Gelindo and Adeodato.⁶

OH: And their family name was?

JT: Rossetto.

OH: And did they come to Australia as single men?

JT: Yes. No, sorry, Domenico was married. Yes, that's right Domenico was married. And at the time Dad was courting Mum and they liked him and they wanted him to join them to come over but Dad was not the adventurous type. He just loved his village and he loved what he did. And he wasn't, maybe he was a bit scared or whatever. So he refused. And they came to Australia and they took on jobs here, now *zio* Gelindo started a farm down at Lockleys, whether it was his I can't remember, or whether he leased the land or whatever. Adeodato was a wharfie, working down at Port Adelaide. And Domenico opened up a little grocery shop now I don't know for how long before they got to this point or what they did up to this point. But then there was something happened in 1928, '29 the time I was born, there was a Depression era, there was no work to be had. Adeodato, *zio* Adeodato came back to Italy, because he thought there was no jobs here and might as well be back in Italy but then I don't know for how long the long the period was but their brother said that things were picking up and jobs were more available. And so he decided to come

⁴ Johnny means the Fascist para-military groups would wait outside the *osteria*

⁵ *Osteria* is the Italian word for local bar, tavern

⁶ Domenico had actually emigrated in 1925. The three brothers who emigrated together in 1927 were Gelindo, Adeodato and Angelo. For more information about the Rossetto family, see: <http://venetimarketgardeners1927.net/1927-pioneer-families/rossetto-family/>

back. But the only thing I remember and I'd hear this as I was getting older but the only thing I remember is being in my grandmother and grandfather's kitchen when *zio* Adeodato was ready to leave and come back to Australia and that's all the memory that I've got of him until we came here in 1940 and that's when I saw him.

(33:39) And you asked me what prompted us to come to Australia. Well, Dad, in 1938, late 1938, '39, I think, he was recalled back in the Army. And Hitler had already showed his what do you call it? He had invaded Poland and Belgium and it looked as if there was going to be another world war and Dad, I think, by what he used to tell us, you know, "We suffered poverty and whatever when we were young through the first world war and I don't want to go through this again." He told Mum to write to one of her brothers a letter to see if he will nominate us to come over. Which he did. And *zio* Gelindo nominated us and we wanted to come as a family, not just him getting away. And Dad, I remember when Dad asked for a weekend leave for a couple of days to come back to the village because he was the one of the Alpine soldiers, the *Alpini*, you know. And he came home to sign the papers and have your photo taken for the passport and everything and always with the fear in there that the war would be in full swing and that he would never be able to get away. But somehow or other after a few false starts, we managed to get out and get on the ship and get back to Australia. We left there in late December 1939 and we arrived in Adelaide on 14th February 1940.

OH: (36:00) So World War II had already begun?

JT: Oh yes, but Italy wasn't into it then and it wasn't until, I think, June 1940, that we were only here four or five months, that Italy entered the War, and of course, then there was a bit of hostility, you know like because we were not just immigrants by that time; we were 'aliens', you know. But to tell the truth, people asked me what kind of treatment did you get? I can't really... I can't really feel ... although I did get a bit of a complex about being Italian because when we arrived here and I went to school, I was introduced as Giovanni, the little Italian boy [sounds it out slowly, as people may have spoken it at the time] --- and that's okay, that's my name and I was an Italian boy. That was my name but when Italy entered the war and some of the kids that I was at school with had some of either their fathers or their uncles or whatever what were soldiers in the war so they had another title which I didn't know what it meant but I knew that they meant to hurt your feelings and called me 'the little dagoe'. And that gave me a complex that I would never ... if ever I went into the city or mixed with Australian friends and all of that, I would refrain to speak Italian in front of them for fear that, because I wanted to pass, pass off as being an Australian.

OH: Of course, yeah, at that age it would have been important.

(38:12) Johnny I'm going to go back a little bit because I'd like to ask you about your experience of being in the Fascist youth movement.

JT: In which?

OH: In the Fascist youth movement.

JT: Oh yes, yes.

OH: You've already told me about the young people. Can you tell me how you became involved?

JT: Oh, well you had to, it was, you couldn't say no I don't want to be in it, you know. All the schools, you had to started off in Italian it was called *figli della lupa* which means sons of the wolf, like Romulus and Remo and that but that was up until you were in Grade ... until you were about --- six or seven or something like that.

OH: And what did you do as the ...?

JT: Oh you were dressed up in the little black shirt and a blue scarf around your neck and a fez, you know. But I don't remember that much about being sons of the wolf.

(39:28) But it was when --- a step up from there that you went, became a *balilla* as you were getting older, you know. And from then on, I remember very well because we, every Saturday afternoon we had to go into the oval, the local oval in Valdobbiadene and practise marching and gymnastics and we were given a miniature rifle with a serial number which you were supposed to, I can't remember how many digits but you had to memorise that and remember that, and you were given that and you had to practise with it, you know.

OH: And you had a uniform?

JT: Pardon?

OH: You had a uniform?

JT: Oh yes, yes, Again black shirt again and the fez with the big 'M'⁷ and the *fascio*⁸, you know the bunch of sticks, right? Which I don't know whether you know what it was supposed to mean. Well, that one stick together you can easily break but if one bunch of sticks put together, it's not easy to break. And that was the thing that Mussolini was saying, "We've got to be together, to be strong, to achieve whatever he wanted to achieve." He became my hero, you know? Mussolini was, I mean he gave us something to do apart from working in the fields and doing all these things, you know.

OH: What did you think about him?

JT: --- I don't know. As I said, he became my hero. He was the *Duce*. He was the --- [sighs] you know, we would have done anything that he said, that he'd done. And I remember when he came when he came to Treviso --- he was the cause of me being, getting into a bus, which I had never been in a car, or a bus in all my life until that time. And then from there, to go to the station and put on the train which took us to Treviso. And I had never been on a train so I mean he was giving me things, when you think of it today, he was coaching us and giving us gifts that naturally you were going to stick by him. But we, at that age, what do you know?

OH: And what happened at Treviso?

⁷ 'M' was for Mussolini

⁸ Fascio is the Italian word for bundle or bunch and it was used as a descriptor for an organised political group in 19th Century Italy. The Fascist party used it as the symbol for their power – a bunch of sticks

JT: Oh, that, oh it was a big thing. I ... by this time I went, as I started off, sons of the wolf to a *balilla* and *balilla moschietiere* and if I was there if I was 16, I would have become a *Vanguardista*, that would have been the highest that you went as being a black shirt, you know?

OH: As a young person?

JT: As a young person, yes. Yeah. You know but you had to be 16 or 18 to be a *vanguardista* but I was looking forward to being one.

OH: And were all these stages compulsory?

JT: Oh, yes.

OH: And for girls as well as the boys?

JT: No girls, well, the girls were in it too but they were called *le piccole italiane*. And they had a uniform too, they had to have a white blouse and a black skirt and they were going around doing gymnastics. I don't think they ever did anything with rifles and whatever but they were in it, as well, and that was compulsory.

OH: And Johnny, who was, who were the people who were running the gymnastics or who were ... you know, managing all of the kids?

JT: (43:45) Well, it started off, I remember my teacher and her name --- she was --- a fanatic Mussolini woman. She ... Fascism was the ultimate for her. I believe that when Mussolini fell, --- and I got that from my aunties and uncles, and all like that, after the War, she was crushed and she didn't last very long and she died because she was so much for Mussolini that you know when it all crumbled ...

OH: So, in class, if she was your teacher, what sort of things would she have said to you about Mussolini?

JT: I remember when we were getting ready to leave Italy and migrate to Australia, she made the whole class stand up and clap at me. [phone rings]

Second file, Interview #1

OH: We're resuming the interview after the phone call.

(00:02) And Johnny you were telling me about your teacher and what she did when you were about to leave to come to Australia.

JT: Yes, when it was my last day to school she made all the class stand up and clapping hands and wishing me well and she stood in front of me afterwards and she says "Giovanni, remember you are going to a foreign country and you'll be going to school and if you hear anybody say anything bad about our *Duce* you must stand up, that is not true, he is a good man." And all like that. Now can you imagine if when I came here and then school and then the War broke out and we became enemy and me, this squirt of 12 years old to stand up to somebody like that? [laughs]

OH: (01:05) What kinds of things were you told about Mussolini that made you feel so good?

JT: Well, we were told, there were things that I remember was that he, --- good things that he did for Italy like making the trains run on time all the time, that's one of them. And there was some land outside of Rome that it was like West Lakes [former marshy land, west of Adelaide], you know and he created three cities next to it, you know and I remember the name it was Sabaudia, Puntinia and I can't remember what the other one was but the things that they said was that when they built these homes and ... Oh and the other thing I found out afterwards that it was all swamp land --- and guess what they used to soak up and dry the land? Australian gum trees. They imported Australian gum trees to dry up the land so that they could build these cities. And I read that in the *Readers Digest* in Italy 20 years later, that was they had. And the things that the teacher was also telling us was that when he built these three little towns that would have been like West Lakes and he built these houses and he furnished them and that he even put the pepper and salt shakers with pepper and salt in it, you know, for the underprivileged. So all these things that they were telling us was the good things that Mussolini was supposed to be doing, you know. And it was all a political thing but, you know, but at 12, what do you know about? You believe everything they tell you.

OH: (03:18) Johnny, what about knowing about your uncles and your grandfather at that time when they were anti-Fascist, like was that spoken about in your family?

JT: Well, no because that was happening before Mum and Dad were even married. I mean when they got away from that and then when the three of them [brothers], one by one he brought the other three over including Mum's two sisters. They all came over here, the whole nine kids came to Australia and there was only one of the sons that went back to and he virtually went back to look after the grandpa and grandma because they were left there with all this land and nobody to work it, you know.

OH: (04:17) So, when you were about to leave then, do you remember the preparations in your family?

JT: Yes, I do. And it was a very ah --- scary for me by hearing what Mum and Dad used to say because Dad was still in the Army and when I think of it afterwards he would have been classed as a deserter because he asked for time off, leave or something like that and packed bags and that and I remember that we got on the ship in Genoa and to me it was such an adventure on a ship, I had never seen the sea and ...

OH: How did you get to Genoa from Bigolino?

JT: Oh, a bus that took us to Cornuda, that was our nearest train station and from there, we went to Genova and I remember that we stayed overnight in *un'albergo* they called it.

OH: Like a hotel?

JT: *Un'albergo*, San Giovanni. My name. [laughs]

OH: Was that a place or a hotel?

JT: No, a hotel, right by the port of Genova, like that. And I remember that the ship made a stop at Livorno, that's Leg Horn, right? And the next stop was Naples and I naturally I wanted to go and see and Dad never wanted to get out and I didn't know, I went with Mum, we went. But Dad

never wanted to get out and I didn't realise this until I got older until we got to Australia. He thought, "Okay, what happens if they wake up that here am I and I am supposed to be in the Army and trying to get out ... the more I present a passport the more my name might bob up somewhere and then they going to sort of take me off, what would happen to my wife and kids? Are they going to continue on?" So he didn't get off the ship until we got to Aden. That was the only, the first stop where he got off the ship and had a look around.

OH: (06:55) And going back to before you left, what do remember about saying goodbye?

JT: Ah ---- I don't know whether I should say this? I didn't like the priest as a kid because he slapped me once for giving an answer that I didn't, I thought that the slap that he gave, I didn't deserve. I got late in the ... what do you call it? Catechism lesson and he comes up, "*Ecco! la persone di importanza!*" He said.

OH: "Here is the person who thinks he's important."

JT: "Here's the person, he is here late. And what's your excuse?" And I said --- "Or what's your reason?" Or whatever it is, like that. And as I said, I had to help my sister to () and then I had to present *la calgliera*. Do you know what a *calgliera* is? You know where they make the polenta and we had to use sand to clean because it was made of copper and I had to fix it all up ready, you know, for when I come home to set the fire to get the water boiling. And all these little things made me late and that I said "I had to clean the ..." What do you call it? Like that. And boom, he says, "I'll show to be a smart ass." --- [laughs] So from that time I never liked him, you know. And it was the thing to do that when a fellow *paesano* was leaving the country to go to another country to say goodbye to the priest. and I didn't want to go and say goodbye to the priest and the town, because there was no, nothing was happening in there, you know and *la famiglia*, the Galliano was leaving the country and leaving the *paesi* to go and of course everybody was in town there because we were waiting for the bus to take us to the station. And the priest came there, you know and in the confusion I was trying to sneak around because everybody was concentrating on Mum and Dad and thinking that I could get away with it, you know. But he sought me out and I had to give him a kiss, and I felt as if, I felt like a Judas. [laughs]

OH: A powerful memory. And Johnny I think we'll leave the interview because it seems like a natural place to end and we'll have another interview about the next part of your life.

JT: Okay.

OH: So thank you.

JT: Okay.

Italian market gardeners oral history project

Interview No: 2 with Johnny Tormena OH872/18, 15 June 2012

OH: This is a second interview with Johnny Tormena recorded for the Italian market gardeners oral history project in Johnny's home at Bellevue Heights on 15th June, 2012, by Madeleine Regan. Thanks, Johnny for agreeing to a second interview.

JT: A pleasure.

OH: (00:25) I'd like to follow something that you were talking about towards the end of the last interview. And it was about an event where you actually met Mussolini.

JT: Well, I didn't meet him to talk to but I got quite close to him. I was a *balilla moschatierei*⁹ at the time and Mussolini was coming to Treviso and all the villages that came under the Treviso area were collected by buses and a train, my first time on a train. And we were taken to Treviso and all the *balillas* and *balilla moschettiere* and *avanguardisti* lined the streets of Treviso where Mussolini came driving past. I can't remember how long that took but after all the march had finished and Mussolini was going back to Rome, he piloted his own plane from Rome to Treviso and we were taken all at the Treviso airport and again formed lines where Mussolini got off the car and walking towards his plane and as he walked towards his plane and all the young kids like us, I must have been eight or nine at the time, I can't remember that well, he would pat one of the fellas on the shoulders, another one, he would tap him on the top of the head. Made contact, in other words. As he came past me, for some reason or other, he just tapped me on his head. To me I was in seventh heaven at the time, at that age. It was a momentous thing that happened to me in Bigolino at the time.

OH: How far was Treviso from Bigolino?

JT: Thirty kilometres.

OH: So that was a big trip in itself for you?

JT: Oh yes, yes because before that, the closest or the furthest that I had been to outside of Bigolino was Valdobbiadene which was our council area and that was five kilometres and the only time that we ever got that I ever got there was they had a *sagra* which in that case was --- in, I think it was February. I used to live for those days.

OH: And when you were telling your parents what would you have told them about that event with Mussolini

JT: Well, I can't remember very well but it was all over the village that Mussolini had tapped me on the head, you know. So I mean I felt as though I was floating on air. [laughs]

OH: (03:57) Because I remember you saying that in your mother's family there were strong opinions against Mussolini.

JT: Oh, very much so. On my mother's family her ... she was one of nine children. There was three girls and six boys and all the boys apparently were anti-Fascists, by what I remember. And at night when they would go to the various *osterias* and the subject would come up about politics

⁹ The term *Balilla* comes from *Opera Nazionale Balilla* (ONB) which was an Italian Fascist youth organisation that operated in the Fascist years in Italy. *Balilla* was for boys aged 8-11 and for girls it was the *Piccole Italiane*. The *balilla moschettieri* was for boys aged 12 and 13, *Avanguardisti* and *Giovani Italiane* were aged between 14 and 18 years.

and Mussolini and all like that, they were so very much against it and arguments would develop, you know, and as they were leaving the *osteria* to go home, the very strong Fascists of the village would wait for them outside and beat them up, you know until at one time as it was getting closer and closer to the second world war, they left the village and two of them migrated to France and -- back in the early '20s, three of Mum's brothers migrated to Australia and it was purely because of, not purely because of that, the economy in Italy wasn't very good and between that and the strong opinion against Fascism and all of that and Australia at the time was asking for unskilled labour they joined and came to Australia, three of them. And another two came in the early '30s. And the last one, the sixth one that came, he came in 1938.

OH: And then your parents came in...?

JT: Then my father in 1939, when Hitler had already started to invade Europe, he'd already invaded Poland and Belgium and that and my father was called back in the Army and he ... remembering when he was a refugee in the First World War and both him and Mum and they had to leave their homes and they suffered hunger and cold and whatever and remembering that, he, my father asked Mum while he was in the Army to write to one of her brothers over there if he would nominate us to come over as a whole family, which he did.

OH: (07:09) And you talked about that in the last interview so what I'd like to do now is to ask you about your arrival in Australia.

JT: Oh, well that was --- an incredible feeling, I felt as though because as I said, my whole 12 years in Italy I never moved outside the village with the population and they were all farmers and gardeners and things like that and all of a sudden we arrived in Adelaide although as compared to today, Adelaide was a small city, you know.

OH: What do you remember? What were your first impressions?

JT: My impression was that I think, I thought that good things were happening to me. Me at 12 from a little village coming to live in a city and living in the main street of the city which was Hindley Street and we lived in a room --- in a house that one of Mum's brothers had a grocery shop there and the four of us lived in one room upstairs and I couldn't, I remember looking out the window and seeing the neon signs which I had never seen of Hindley Street, you know, it was very --- I mean I felt as though --- I don't know, it was a fantastic feeling, you know.

OH: And who would your parents mixed with in the early weeks and months of being in Adelaide?

JT: (09:03) Well, My father, within a week we were here, he went working in the mica mines about some hundred kilometres, miles at the time, outside Alice Springs. And he was away there for 12 months while Mum and my sister and myself lived in this one room upstairs for --- I remember when Italy entered the War, we were still living in there and --- and the only means of --- because we were not naturalised, there was no pensions or any things like that and Mum took on a milk round delivering milk around to all the Italian families around the West End which was like a 'little Italy' at the time. And she did that with a bike and two containers on the handle bars and going around because it wasn't bottled like it is today or carton-ed, it was loose, you know and she had to measure out and people would leave their billies at the gate and all that with an

order of one litre or two litres or whatever it was at the time. And I had to go with another two containers, full ones and meet her at certain places where she would run out of milk and so to save her coming back to get another two, I would meet her somewhere, I would collect the two empty ones, go back where the containers were, fill them and meet her in another spot. Now I can't remember for how long she did that but was, I was a sleepy head, I loved my sleep but she used to get me out at half past four in the morning, and because by five, and the milk had to be delivered to the people who wanted their breakfast before going to work so --- And once we finished that, we just had time for breakfast and then go to school.

(11:32) And Mum would go and work and do the washing in various boarding houses. I know there was two boarding houses that especially that she started off with. One had 22 men in there.

OH: And where was that, Johnny?

JT: That was in Waymouth Street and there was a family called Stocco and so that one day she would go there. And another day she would go to another one which was a very nice lady that gave me a job as I was going to school, as a matter of fact. Her name was Castagna and that was in West Terrace. And when we used to come home from school, Mum didn't want us roaming around the streets, you know, and we had to report to where she was working. And this Mrs Castagna asked me, she said, what did I do on Saturdays and I said well, nothing, I would help Mum to catch up with her work. And she said, well, if you come and help me on Saturdays to go and collect the groceries and clean the bathrooms after all the men were there and help me make the beds and wax the floors and all of that, you know and she used to give me --- three shillings -- - I felt rich because in those days three shillings means that I didn't have to ask Mum for sixpence to buy an ice cream or buy a comic or whatever it is you know, it was terrific. As that went along and I can't remember for how long and then she'd ask me what time do you start school? And I said 9 o'clock and she said if you help me come and make the beds every morning before you go to school, she would give me eight shillings a week. That was incredible because when I eventually finished school at 16 and my first job was working 48 hours a week and getting 22 shillings, that was incredible. So it was terrific. But I always remember the first 12 months or so that Mum was doing the milk round, she wanted to get enough money to buy food and pay rent for lodgings for where we were staying and she was getting 25 shillings for doing that, seven mornings a week delivering the milk.

OH: (14:23) Did you continue helping your Mum with the milk rounds when you were working at the boarding house?

JT: Did ... I'm sorry?

OH: Did you continue helping your Mum with the milk rounds while you worked ...

JT: Oh no, no. She finished the milk round by that time and she concentrated on that because there were a couple of other homes that had boarders and asked Mum to go and work there. And one of them was Mattiazzo and that they had a butcher's shop in Currie street, so that was another one and another day she would go and help my Auntie who was married to Gelindo Rossetto, one of Mum's brothers who was the man that nominated us to come to Australia. So virtually she was working five days a week washing and that was before washing machines and everything had to be done by hand, you know, so --- but it was terrific. Mum enjoyed it because

she never had to worry about there was always a shilling coming in to buy this and pay the school money or buy a shirt or whatever it was which wasn't happening in Italy, you know. It was a struggle.

OH: (15:47) And going back to Mrs Castagna's boarding house, whereabouts on West Terrace was that?

JT: It was in between Waymouth Street and Currie Street, a big boarding ... Now there are two multi-story buildings in there, in place of that, that was demolished.

OH: Was that a boarding house mainly for Italians?

JT: Well, they were all Italians, I didn't know anybody else in there. Yes, they were all Italians.

OH: And all men?

JT: All men. All men, all of them. They were all men that had migrated to Australia and didn't have a family and they went into these boarding houses. But there was quite a number of these boarding houses around at that time but the biggest one, the one that had the most people was the Stocco that had 22 men. Mrs Castagna had a dozen. And --- Mattiazzo's butcher shop, they only had about six men because they had a lot of rooms and the husband was running the butcher shop downstairs and the wife would look after the boarders, you know.

OH: And I'm curious to know whether there were many beds in one room.

JT: No more than two in one room and in Stocco's they were all two --- there was a couple that had three in there. Mrs Castagna had about three or four rooms that here was only one in each room and one of those people, his name was Evelino Rodiguero who eventually married an Australian woman which she passed away, only a matter of about two years ago here and he became a very good friend after many years.

OH: (17:54) And what about school? Can you tell me about going to school here in Australia?

JT: Well, I'll always remember the first day that they took me there and naturally a cousin of mine that was the daughter of Domenico Rossetto where we were boarding came into translate and all that and because I had done Grade 5 in Italy, they didn't start me off in Grade 1 here but they put me in Grade 3 with another cousin of mine there. And I found out many, many, and I'm talking about 30 years after I left school and going to school, that the nun that taught me on that year was her first year as a teacher and she was a novice and she didn't know how to handle a school where with somebody in there [who] could not understand what she was saying so she sat me next to my cousin for him to translate to me and to make it easy for her and also to communicate, she told him to tell me that to see what he was doing and to do the same thing. So I was looking at everything that he was doing and if there was something that wasn't written, he had to explain to me what it was all about but anyway to cut a long story shorter, that year, that was Grade 3, he passed so I passed because I copied everything he did but I was none the wiser. I didn't learn a thing just barely, just barely started to communicate with other school children there. But the following year when I was in Grade 4 there was a jolly old nun, she was Irish, very, very jolly, I liked her from the beginning and she didn't want me to sit next to my cousin and she got a desk and put it right in front of the class and all the class was at the back and at this time, I

was offended and was feeling --- bad about it because by this time Italy had entered the War and where before was referred to as 'the little Italian boy', now I was an 'alien', wasn't just a novelty I was an alien and --- there was words they would called you 'a little dagoe' instead. I didn't know what they meant but I got the feeling that they wanted to, that it was offensive. And anyway she got my cousin to explain that i had nothing to do with racial, like that, but she said I don't care if his work is all wrong but it has to be his work, not yours. It worked, apparently because I came third in the class. But it was, there was always that feeling there that she gave me that treatment not only of that but because I was an alien which never happened.

(21:44) And there's a little story after that, that it would have been 40 years later back in the '70s. Can I jump that far ahead? Back in the '70s when I was working at John Martins, that was the last job I had before retirement and I worked there for 28 years. One of the buyers that were working in there wanted to borrow some ornaments and some stage things because I was working in the Display Department, to decorate the stage for the final concert that they have at the end of the year at the Dominican Convent where I was going to school.

OH: And the name of the Dominican Convent was Saint..?

JT: That was called St Mary, yes but at that time it was called Dominican Convent.

OH: In Franklin Street?

JT: Yes, and I said what kind of thing do you want, to this buyer. And he said, look, he says, can you come with me, he says on your lunch hour and he says, we'll go to the Convent and we'll see what it is, you know. And I mean, I knew this stage very well because my second year at school I was on the stage, you know that was the schoolroom and anyway after we saw Mother Superior there and decided what we were going to do with the decorating, I asked Mother Superior, I said, "Mother Superior", I said, "Do you know a Sister Mary Reginald?" And she said, "How do you know her?" I said, "She was my teacher the second year I came to Australia." And she said, "Really?" She said, "Look, she's in the schoolroom upstairs, go and see her, she'd love to see you", you know. Now bearing in mind, that this was 40 or so years, this was in the '70s, 40 years later. And I went up there and I knocked at the door and the door opened and she appeared and she said, "For goodness' sake, it's Giovanni!", she said. She didn't stop to look, this was, I mean this was 40 years later and yet spontaneously she came out and she knew me. Which was incredible. [laughs] Of course, then she wanted to know everything and guess what? The first thing she asked me, "Do you still go to Mass?" because I used to be an altar boy serving Mass when I was going to school. And I said er ...you know, I could talk to her not as a scholar anymore, I could talk to her. And I said, "Oh, Sister I only go to church", I said, "At weddings and funerals." [laughs] And she said, "For goodness sake, everybody says that." And she wanted to know where I lived and I said Bellevue Heights and she said that's close to Saint Bernadette's Church. "I know, my mother goes to the Saint Bernadette's." And she said, "And you never go?" And I said, "No." And she said well, Father Horgan was there and he was one of the priests I served Mass at and she said, "You go to church there and you meet a nice Catholic girl and you get married." And I said, "I tell you what, Sister, if I get married," I said, "I'm going to invite you to the wedding." And she said, "And I'll come too." And I said, "I'll want the first dance." "Oh go on wit' you", she says. [laughs]

OH: What a lovely story. [laughter] So you went to school at St Mary's?

JT: Oh yes. Now we've jumped 40 years ahead now with that incident. [laughs]

OH: (26:04) Yes and we can come back to 1940, '41. How many years did you do school?

JT: School? I did 1940, Grade 3, '41, Grade 4, '42, Grade 5 and '43, Grade 6. So, in December, at the end of that year when I turned 16 and I could join the workforce.

OH: What was it like being older than the rest of the children in the class?

JT: --- Oh I didn't, I never even thought of it at the time, you know. But yes, I would have been three years ahead of them. But I never thought of it and it was never a question, so I don't know.

OH: And obviously from your description of being the boy in the front of the class and the time that war began there weren't many other children who'd come straight from Italy at that time?

JT: (27:13) No, no because the ship that we came to Australia with was one of two from the Lloyd Triestino line called, one was 'Remo' which is () and the other one was 'Romolo'. 'Romolo' and 'Remo' and the 'Remo' only did one more trip back to us by the time it finished the trip and dropped us off and then went back and came back again. And by the time it came back, Italy had joined the War and the 'Remo' was taken prisoner here in Australia and was used for the whole of the War years as a ship for touring around the coast of Australia, not touring but used as whatever, you know and 'Romolo', they set fire, they sank it. The Captain would not, rather than give himself up and I read about that just recently too. Rather than give himself up as a prisoner, outside the coast of Victoria or something like that, he sank the ship, the Captain. And I think that the crew was taken prisoners, you know, prisoners of war.

OH: (28:45) So do you have memories of what happened during the War to Italian people in Adelaide?

JT: Oh yes. See as I said, the West End of Adelaide was, they called it like a little Italy but because there, if anything, the Australian was the foreigner there because the majority of all the Hindley surroundings were the Italians, Greeks or Syrians, you know because most of the people these scholars that I went to school with there were all there, we had Syrians, we had Greeks. As a matter of fact, what is it --- radio station 891 [Adelaide radio station presenter] Matthew Abraham? Well I went to school with some of his ancestors because they lived in Gray Street just around the corner from us on the way to the school.

OH: Was it a long walk to the school for you?

JT: No it was only the block because Waymouth Street... and Franklin Street was the next one and that's where the church, the school was, yes, it was really good.

OH: Going back to your memory of the War...

JT: Yes.

OH: Do you remember any feelings among Italian people, say, you know, your parents' generation talking about the War?

JT: Yes, well, naturally they were --- see you were, you had to have a radio licence and we couldn't afford a radio and we couldn't afford a radio and we didn't own a radio until way after the War before we could afford a radio. And at my age, I don't think if the oldies talked about the War, we were never included, never mixed in with it. It was a whole new way of life that I learnt here because in Italy, on Saturdays, for instance, being a *balilla*, we had to go training gymnastics and we had a miniature rifle with its own serial number which we had to know, you know. But when I came to Australia, that wasn't happening. The scholars that I was going to school with, on Saturday afternoon, they were going to the local cinema to see the cowboy movies and all of that and I loved it. So I joined with them, you know and that's ... by the way, is where the hero-worship towards Mussolini that I had as a kid, was replaced when I went to see Errol Flynn in 'The adventures of Robin Hood'. He became my hero. [laughter]

OH: Where did you go to the pictures?

JT: Ah, you know where the, it used to be the Tivoli, but now it's 'Her Majesty's', across the road from there was a cinema called The Empire but it was known as the local bug house. [laughter]

OH: And so you went to matinee sessions there?

JT: We went to matinees there, yes. We found out about who was Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Hop A Long Cassidy. [laughs]

OH: (33:01) And when your parents came to Adelaide, they would have met up with your Mum's relatives?

JT: Yes. Yes.

OH: What can you tell me about the relatives who were living here in Adelaide?

JT: Well, three of her brothers were here. The youngest one who came here two years before us only but the others had been here since the 1920s. Oh, we thought their way of life because we in Italy we had a peasant life with a stable and things like that. Instead here, they didn't have that and they had a bathroom and they had a toilet that you could flush, not going [to the toilet] in between the vines and all like that. As I said, to me I felt as if I'd gone to some fantasy-land or something like that, you know.

OH: Could we go through the relatives who were here, each of the families?

JT: Oh right.

OH: Maybe we could start with the names.

JT: Okay we could start with *zio*, uncle Gelindo who is the eldest of the nine children. He was the one who nominated us.

OH: And his surname?

JT: Rossetto. Yes. And the other one was Domenico Rossetto.

OH: Can we talk about Gelindo?

JT: Yes?

OH: He was married?

JT: He was married, yes. He had a son and a daughter here.

OH: So, can you tell me his wife's name?

JT: His wife, Lina, Lina Rossetto.

OH: And the son and the daughter?

JT: And the son and the daughter? Aldo and Elena. And then while we were here, he had a third boy called Silvano.

OH: And where did they live?

JT: They lived in a street called Crowther Street which was between Wymouth Street and Franklin Street, only a stone throw from where we lived and ...

OH: What did Gelindo do?

JT:(35:27) *Zio* Gelindo is the one who had the mica mine up there and that's where Dad went to work in the mica mine and he also is the one who had a --- garden around tomato glasshouses down in Pierson Street, do you know Pierson Street, Lockleys? And which was just going down to the River Torrens because I remember that he had a pump that he used to pump up the water to water the garden. So he had the mica mine, he had the garden here and he had the milk round which he passed over to Mum.

OH: So where was your auntie Lina living and the children living when you came?

JT: In Crowther Street.

OH: Did they move from Crowther Street to Pierson Street Lockleys to the market garden?

JT: Oh no, no. They only had the garden down there, you know.

OH: Oh, they didn't live there?

JT: No, they only had the land there.

OH: So, there was Gelindo and his family and who was next in the family?

JT: (36:47) And then there was Domenico who had the grocery shop in the Hindley Street and he was married to a Carmela Buffon who is Oscar Mattiazzo's mother's sister. And they had two children, Anna and Modesto, who was the cousin the first year I had to sit next to in school to act as interpreter. So those children had all been born here. No, Anna wasn't. No *zio* Gelindo's children were all born here but Anna was born in Italy and came over with her mother because

zio Domenico was one of the three, the three brothers that came over single. I think he got married by proxy, I'm not sure.¹⁰

OH: And who was next after...?

JT: (37:5) And next was Adeodato Rossetto. He was a wharfie but he worked mainly in Melbourne so he was by himself. He never married ... so we didn't see much of him until later on and he left Melbourne because all his brothers and sisters like Rebuli, that was Mum's sister,¹¹ you know and Bernardi, that was another of Mum's sister. And they were all here in Adelaide so he moved back to Adelaide.

OH: (38:37) And so after Adeodato, who was there?

JT: Of the family, Giovanna Rebuli and she married,

OH: Yes

JT: Er, of the family, just Giovanna Rebuli

OH: Right. She married ...So Giovanna was the sister of the Rossetto?

JT: The sister of my mother, yes, of the Rossetto, yes

OH: Yeah, and she married?

JT: She married Bruno Rebuli. Hmm

OH: (39:07) And was Bruno Rebuli also from Bigolino?

JT: Yes. Yes.

OH: And, when had they come to Australia?

JT: Well, Bruno had come in the early '20s and Auntie came later. I think it was around about 1929, '30 that she came over with three of the children. And then Guido, which is the youngest one, he was born here some seven or eight years later [in 1938].

OH: And can you tell me about they were doing to Australia?

JT: Oh yes, I forgot whether it was the first day that we arrived but my uncle Domenico that had the shop, he had a car. I never knew that I'd have an uncle who had a car [laughs] and he drove us down to say hello to Mum's sister and she couldn't, I don't know but she couldn't but she wasn't at the station when we arrived and from there they took us to the farm that they had in Valetta Road right? And my Uncle Domenico said, just go up to Bruno and don't tell him who you are, just go up there and ask him if he's got a job for you, like that, you know. And so Dad went up there and that he was looking for a job and he said I remember him saying something about, I was told later, that he didn't have any work at the time but when the tomatoes were going to be ready to be

¹⁰ Domenico had married Carmela Buffon in Italy in 1924 and he arrived in Adelaide in 1925. Carmela and Anna arrived in 1929.

¹¹ Giovanna (Nanna) Rossetto had married Brunone Rebuli who emigrated in 1927 with his three brothers-in-law, Gelindo, Adeodato and Angelo. She arrived with their eldest three children in 1931.

picked but of course, we didn't know what tomatoes were. I mean we knew tomatoes but we didn't know when he said tomatoes, he didn't say *pomodoro* [laughs] So he carried on for a few minutes like that, you know and my uncle Bruno didn't recognise him until finally he said, “*Dai*”, “Come on Bruno, don't you know who I am? I'm Galliano”, he said. Oh oh. [laughs]

OH: Because did they not know you were coming?

JT: Oh, they knew we were coming but he didn't expect him that he was going to go up there and ask for work [laughs]. Of course by that time as I said he came in the early '20s and we arrived here in 1940 so there was nearly 20 years difference so he probably didn't recognise him.

OH: (41:55) And what do you remember about the farm at Valetta Road at that time?

JT: Oh well... it was new to me because I had never heard of people growing vegetables inside glasshouses. It was the first time I even heard of and to see all these rows of glasshouse, it was a novelty because everything that we grew in Bigolino was out in the open, you know. So it was all new.

OH: And do you remember what it looked like? The area?

JT: Oh the area --- it was very --- well, for one thing Frogmore Road was not even bitumenised.

OH: Valetta Road, was that bitumenised?

JT: No, no way. And I remember the Valetta Road was lined, the streets were lined with olive trees --- And I know that we used to go --- olive trees and hazelnut trees, bushes because we used to go there, going on for years later, when we used to push the bike to go swimming. Now that was another luxury that I thought was fantastic that I had never seen the sea until --- I can't even remember seeing the sea in a book. I knew that Venice was all in the sea but I had never had seen I could only imagine it, I always thought the sea would have an end to it, you know --- And to live here and knowing that we were on the coast and people used to go to the beach every weekend and all of that, to me, was luxury plus. And we used to have a pushbike that we would go down on..., a group of us from the city.

(44:09) Mind you, this is after the War had finished because during the War we were not allowed to outside the square mile of Adelaide unless you had a permit from the police.

OH: And was that a permit that you had to get for every time?

JT: From the police. Every time, yes. The permit would only be for the one day and it was always on a Sunday for us that Mum wanted to go down and see her sister. So we used to go the police station and even me at my age, 12, 13, 14 we had to be finger-printed and signed and we had to be back in the square mile of Adelaide by the end of the day.

OH: Like daylight or night?

JT: No, no, daylight. Well, we would always be back by, in daylight. And the thing was it was also shortened, the visit we could pay was shortened because the trams didn't function until 1.00 o'clock on Sunday afternoons. That's when they used to start. So we used to catch the tram in Currie Street and got off at Frogmore Road and then walk from there to the farm which was over

the Torrens, that's where Auntie lived, and at the end of the day we would have to sort of get back there. But I must admit that I, as a kid the school friends that I had made, I used to cheat. And we used to sometimes, I remember ... but I always had it in my mind that I'm going to caught and I would go with the other friends and it used to cost tuppence, two pennies to go to Morialta Falls. So I used to go with them but always with the fear that I'm going to get stopped because I haven't got a permit to go down there. Because the others, if they were Italians, they were naturalised and born here.

OH: And they didn't need the permit?

JT: And they didn't need a permit it was only us because we were not naturalised. Everybody else there that was naturalised could go anywhere.

OH: (46:36) And when your family went to see your mother's sister and the Rebuli family, what would you do when you got there?

JT: Oh, well, most, I think that Mum and Mum and Dad would talk with auntie but they wanted news of the latest about certain, a lot of people that they knew in the village and ... "Are they alive?" "Are they dead?" "Are they sick?" "Who's got married?" "And how many kids have they got?" And all like that. But with me, with my cousins, we would go out and kick the football out on Frogmore Road in the dirt, that's it.

OH: And do you remember other people who would have lived near your cousins, like did you ever go visiting?

JT: (47:33) There was another family that we became friends with over there and their name was Griguol. And then when I --- we came back and I was still going to school, they moved into town in a street, I think it was called Phillips Street, it was behind the brewery and they lived in a house in there. And they only had the one son and his name was Dino. And it's funny that I should say that because when we eventually, after ten years that we were living in Waymouth Street because houses were unavailable in those days, they weren't building houses so you had to, by word of mouth. find out that somebody's house was living. I mean, we went to live in Gilberton, I didn't even, never even heard of Gilberton before.

OH: (48:38) So just back tracking a little. You first were staying with your Auntie above the shop.

JT: Above the shop.

OH: And then how long did you stay there?

JT: We stayed there because when the day it was announced that Italy had entered the War which was four or five months after we arrived, we were still living there and Dad was still up in the mica mines. And from there we went to ... we found ... Mum found two, four rooms opposite Mattiazzo's butcher shop on the corner of North Street and Currie Street that belonged to a Ballestrin. Ah now ... And so we were there when Dad came back from the mica mine, about 12 months later. He was involved in a cave-in and he got scared, a piece of rock came down and cut him and his face and he got scared like that and he wanted to be back with his family and all that. So he came back home, came back with us. And soon after that, a lot of places like Stocco that

had the what do you call it? And a couple of other places, they used to sell glasses of wine like they did in Italy in the *osteria*, you know, so and that's where the Italians, most of them were single people, alone here or if they had a family, the family was in Italy and they would get in there and 'chew the fat', as you might say and from there it turns out that ... I don't know if you have ever heard of Cescato? --- Oh, yes that's right, because Linda, you mentioned Linda did you, that's her daughter. Ah, they had bought the house next door to where they were living and they also had boarders in there. And Dad happened to have been there, and said, "What are you going to do with the house? And they said, "Oh we're were going to move into it." "And what are you going to do with this house?" "Oh, we'll rent it." And he said, "Well, I'll rent it", you know. So we went to live in their house that was used as a boarding house and they moved next door and we were there for ten years. And...

OH: And what was that house like? Can you describe it?

JT: Well, I can only tell you that even poor as were in Italy, we had electricity in the bedrooms, they didn't. They only had electricity in the kitchen and two rooms downstairs but the two bedrooms upstairs didn't have any power. So they had kerosene lamp like that, you know. And then as I got older and found that I bought some electric wire and I made an extension and I plugged it into the light that was there because it was going up the stairs and pull the cord up there and connected it to the light up there so that I could read. I remember reading up there with the little kerosene lamp, reading the comic books and ...

OH: So you stayed there for ten years?

JT: (52:14) For ten years. --- And sadly enough, --- Dad, after ten years, died suddenly, in three days, he died.

OH: What had he been doing after he came back?

JT: Came down? He went working for --- a company that was two brothers, Italian brothers. And I think they was from the Friuli. Their name was Del Fabbro. And they had a job that they used to do concrete work and terrazzo work and all, like that. And Dad had never done any work like that before. But he went working for them and he was with them until he died.

OH: And that must have been very hard for your family?

JT: (53:04) Well, it was a sad period because we didn't know, we had never seen a doctor in our lives and things like that. I meant I didn't see a doctor until I was nearly 65, 66. Never seen a doctor. And that I can thank a friend of mine I used to work with that we both retired at the same time and he pushed me that I, we met one day with a group and he was late and he apologised and he said I was held up at the doctor and I asked, "Why did you go to the doctor?" "Oh, nothing wrong", he says "It's just for a check-up." And he says to me, "How long since you've had a check-up?" I said, "I'd never seen a doctor in my life." And he said, "You're mad. You're mad, at your age. You should go and see a doctor." And I said, "But, Lionel", I said, "What will I go and see a doctor, he'll ask me what's wrong with you?" And I'll say, "I don't know, a friend of mine said I should see you", you know. So, anyway he became a bit of a nuisance because he kept on ringing me up and said, "Have you been yet? Have you been yet?" Until finally to get him off my back I went to see a doctor. And --- sure enough, he said, "What is the matter?" And I told him, I

said that a friend said that at my age I should go and see a doctor. And so he took my blood pressure and things like that and then to make more, to go more into it, he made an appointment to see the cardiologist and I went to the cardiologist and I won't go into long details there, but I ended up that within three days I was under the hammer and I had five bypasses. And it was over Easter and by the way, this was on Thursday and he said what had happened, you know, you've got a blockage and I didn't know what he was talking about and my guess he said is there's more than one but I'll send you to the cardiologist and the cardiologist then found out, he said yes, there's more than one. And I said well, what happens now. He said, well, I've made an appointment for you to see the physician that's going to do the operation and all of that, you know. My head was spinning because I never felt anything. And he told me afterwards, the physician told me, "Okay, I'll let you have Easter at home", it was Easter weekend, "And I'll see you here on Tuesday at Ashford [hospital]. And he told me at the time that because he gave me an angiogram and that showed they had had four blockages but by the time I came out of the Intensive Care, and he tells me that he did five.

OH: So it was fortunate that you went to the doctor?

JT: Yes, because I asked him afterwards, you know, as I got to know him and to talk to him and I said, tell me doctor I said, "What would have happened if I wasn't shamed into, by a friend, to come and see you, what would have happened?" And he said, "Oh", he says, "You could have had a heart attack", he said, "And if it wasn't fatal", he said "We could save you." He said, "You would have had a restricted life where you couldn't do the things you did before." "As it is now", he says, "Anything you've done up to now, you can do." And I've been okay and that was 23 years ago.

OH: Wow, that's a great story, isn't it?

JT: Mmmn.

OH: Johnny, we're going to finish this interview but the next interview we'll pick up talking about your working life because you began work at 16, is that right?

JT: Yes. Okay

OH: I look forward to that. Thank you very much.

JT: Okay.

Interview No: 3 with Johnny Tormena OH872/18, recorded on 6th July 2012

OH: This is a third interview with Johnny Tormena recorded by Madeleine Regan for the Italian market gardeners oral history project on 6th July 2012 in Johnny's home at Bellevue Heights. Thank you, Johnny, for agreeing to this next interview.

JT: My pleasure.

OH: I'd like to start by following up a couple of things from the previous interview and it's about some of your relatives. Last time you talked about the brother and sister of your mother and I'm wondering if you could just me a little bit about Antonietta Bernardi. Antonietta?

JT: Oh, Antonietta, *si*.

OH: And how she came to Australia? And just a brief history of her?

JT: Well, she came to Australia actually back in the early '30s with her husband, my Uncle, and they spent most of their time from what I remember them talking about, they lived in a tent. My Uncle was a supervisor when they were building the road up at Karoonda so they lived in a tent there. And their first child which was a girl and they named her Mary, --- I don't know for how many years they were here but they returned back around about, back to Italy, around 1937, '38 and which was only a couple of years prior to us leaving Italy and coming to Australia so my Auntie Antonietta, I barely knew her, at that time, and I didn't see her again until I went to Italy at aged 27. They lived in Caerano di San Marco, they had an *osteria* and they also had a tobacconist shop there. So I saw her for maybe a couple of months there because then I left and went to London and I worked in London for a few months. By the time I came back to Australia, her first son that was born in Italy during the War, came to Australia because his father had arrived. Uncle, had come back to Australia but Auntie didn't come back to Australia until about 1960, I think, you know, with her other son. And from then on, and we both lived, at the time, in Gilberton, in the same street. After that --- we, we built this house up here that we shifted into back in 1967 but they remained in Gilberton, so we began to see less and less of each other.

OH: What were your cousins' names? There was Mary and...?

JT: Mary, there was Danilo and Leone.

OH: And you still keep in contact?

JT: With Danilo and Leone but Mary passed away some years ago.

OH: Right. And Johnny, another one I wanted to follow up, was Giuseppe, your mother's brother.

JT: The youngest, her youngest brother, yes. Actually he came to Australia in 1928, two years before us. He came in 1938, we arrived in February 1940. He went up into the mica mines outside of Alice Springs.

OH: Was that the 'Spotted Tiger'?

JT: The 'Spotted Tiger', yes, that's right. By the time that we arrived here in 1940, we actually didn't see Uncle Beppi, as they called, for maybe 18 months because he was up in the mica mines and we stopped in Adelaide. Then my father, when we arrived, well, the week after we arrived he went to the 'Spotted Tiger' mica mines while Mum and myself and my sister were going to school here.

OH: Your Uncle Giuseppe married...?

JT: He married Bruna ---

OH: Battaglia?

JT: Battaglia, yes that's right. They married about 1942, I would say because I remember their first child being born, Valeria and their first son, a couple of years later, Alano. They were both born when they were living in the same house with us.

OH: And where was that house?

JT: That was in Waymouth Street.

OH: So your Auntie lived with you while her...?

JT: While Uncle Beppi was up in the mica mines, yes. And of course, while then after she had the children, my mother used to look after the children while Bruna went to work. The job she had was as a theatre cleaner so she was at home all day looking after the children but she had to start early at 6:00 in the morning until about 10:00 o'clock and then--- in the afternoon about 6:00 o'clock for another hour or two so during that time, Mum used to look after the children.

OH: Johnny, what about the Battaglia family? Where did they come from in Italy?

JT: They came from a small village outside of --- I think it was outside, just before you get into Castelfranco.

OH: So they were also *veneti*?

JT: Oh, yes, yes.

OH: The Battaglia family, where did they live?

JT: Here in Australia, you mean? In Hindley Street. There was a corner in Hindley Street, a whole row of houses all attached which they used to call the Italian corner and they were the houses belonged to a Brazzale who had a factory in Liverpool Street processing the mica that was coming down from the Spotted Tiger mine. So they lived there for, oh, as long as I can remember. It was all Italians down there, the West End of Adelaide was like a little Italy. ---- The first job that Mum had while Dad was up in the mica mines was delivering milk to all the Italian families around the West End on a push bike, can you believe with two containers on the handle bars. [laughs]

OH: We talked about that last time, like your mother was obviously a strong woman.

JT: Yes. [laughs]

OH: You know the row of houses owned by Brazzale, where were they? Were they on the northern side?

JT: Ah...

OH: The North Terrace side or the Brewery side?

JT: The Brewery side. There was quite a number of families there, it was, and opposite them was, you mentioned the Bailetti? So there was a lot of Italians around that area at that time.

OH: When you went to school, there was obviously quite a few Italian children?

JT: Well, yes, if anything, if I think back onto it, me being a foreigner who couldn't speak the language and in the class, well, there was many Italians, there was --- who were the others? Lebanese, Syrians. If anything, the Australian was the foreigner there.

[laughter]

OH: That's interesting. Following up one set of relatives, you told me last time about your Auntie and Uncle Griguol who lived on Frogmore Road?

JT: No, Rebuli.

OH: Oh, Rebuli, sorry.

JT: Yes, yes. [laughs]

OH: Rebuli. How long would they have lived there on Frogmore Road?

JT: Well, all --- let's see. They were in Frogmore Road when we arrived from Italy but they had been there for a number of years because they had... Uncle Bruno Rebuli who, whose wife was Mum's sister, older sister.

OH: And her name was?

JT: Giovanna.

OH: Giovanna.

JT: Giovanna and they had, he had a farm of glasshouses on Valetta Road at the time which was an unmade road at the time. Well, as I remember, they lived there all through the War, and possibly, it would have been, maybe in the '50s when they shifted out of there. When the oldest brother and the youngest brother opened a little deli in Grange Road and from there, they built a unit next to it and they shifted out of Frogmore Road and lived in Grange Road. So that would have been, as I said, about the end of '40s, the early '50s.

OH: Would they have owned the land there that they were farming?

JT: Oh, that I don't know whether they rented it or whether they owned it. I couldn't tell you that, I'm not aware of that.

OH: (11:55) You had another Uncle Rossetto who had land near the river?

JT: Yes, that was Gelindo, he was the one who was, that nominated us coming to Australia. He had, and there again, I don't know whether he owned the land but he did have glasshouse there, came right up to the end of the river because he water the garden pumping the water from the river. He had that as well as this mica mine up there that Uncle Beppi was working on and --- he also had the milk round that Mum took over, you know, so Mum supported us going to school while Dad was up in the mica mines, she supported us going to school by delivering the milk then working, doing the washing for three of the --- what do you call them? Boarding houses around Adelaide, around the West End, you know.

OH: 13:22 Johnny, I'm interested to know what you think about the *veneti* who went up to the Spotted Tiger or the other mica mines. Why do you think so many *veneti* went there?

JT: I, I think... Look, I couldn't answer that --- The people that went up there were people that migrated to Australia because there was no work in Italy, they left their country, politics had a lot to do with it when Fascism first started and if they were anti-Fascist and --- no jobs were concerned and Australia, at the time, as I understand it, was asking for unskilled labour. So they came over and they took any job that they could get because another one of my uncles that came over here, the job that he had was up in the country, chopping wood, cutting down trees and things like that, chopping wood. And another one of the uncles, the one that first came, because four of the brothers came together back in the early '20s, he was a wharfie. So I think that there was no choosing a job, it was whatever you could get, at the time.

OH: It must have been a very strange experience, these people from the Veneto going to a place like the 'Spotted Tiger', desert country.

JT: Oh, yes, I think so. Well, for my father, for instance, my father in Italy, he was a *carattiere*, they called it, like he had a couple of horses, he used to pick up goods from railway stations and deliver them to different factories or different shops and things like that. And that was the only job that he knew. But when he came to Australia, the first job was for over a year, digging in the mica mines and then when he came back after an accident, I don't know whether we spoke about that before? We did? After the accident that he had and he came back and he went to work making concrete, you know, for --- a company, a couple of Italians that had a business doing that here, Del Fabbro, I think.

OH: Mmnn.

JT: Well, he had never done that before in all his life. So, I suppose as they say, when the water gets deep, you take on anything you can get to keep afloat.

OH: (16:23) Well, talking about working life, I'd like to ask you about your working life, Johnny. So if we start at the beginning, your very first job?

JT: The first job?

OH: Yeah.

JT: [laughs] Because I virtually did a bit of work while I was going to school, I used to go and help the boarding houses on a Saturday to collect the groceries, clean the bathrooms, wash dishes and I used to get three shillings for the whole day which was a lot of money in those days and it made me ... it gave a certain amount of independence not having to ask Mum and Dad for sixpence to buy an ice cream or anything like that, you know.

OH: What about when you left school, can you tell me what happened, you know how old you were.

JT: Well, I turned 16 in November 1943, eh, and in December, I got my first job via the nuns in the school that we were going to because they got a, a request from that they were looking for a

messenger boy, and it was a jewellery shop and watchmakers, like that.

OH: What was the name?

JT: And they wanted a messenger boy.

OH: What was the name of the shop?

JT: The name, Dean's.

OH: Dean?

JT: Dean's.

OH: Yeah, how do you spell it?

JT: [spells out the letters] D-e-a-n-s. Yeah. And it was in the, in Rundle Street right down near Pulteney Street, so I started there in December when, at the end of the school, in December, early December and I lasted there until about the middle of February of 1944. I wasn't too happy with that, I never actually, unlike a lot of people, a lot of kids, even that know what they would like to do when they went to work, I have never thought of what I would like to do, I took whatever was available.

OH: And you had finished Year or Grade 6? Is that right?

JT: Yes, I had done Grade 6, I had done Grade 5 in Italy but when I came to Australia, they put me in Grade 3 and I had to repeat that which is understandable. It must have been very difficult for the nun that was teaching at the time because I found out some 16 years later that that was her first year of teaching, and to have 30 children in there of all different races with one that couldn't understand a word that you were saying... [laughs]

OH: But Johnny you told me last interview that you did really well the next year? At school, you did really well?

JT: Well, the first year was useless because they put me---

OH: Put you next to your cousin?

JT: Next to my cousin.

OH: But in the next year, you did very well?

JT: The next year, well, I came third in the class. But that was, I think, that was the effort that the teacher that I had, didn't want me to associate, or didn't put near my cousin. She put me in a desk by myself and she told my cousin to explain that it was nothing to do with me and the race and being an 'alien' at that time and all that sort of thing. "But I don't care if his work is all wrong as long as it's his work, not yours." So at the end of that year, I came third in the class.

OH: So you had another year at school before you began work?

JT: Yes.

OH: But did you want to go on further with your education?

JT: Well, at that time, you had to work until you were 16 until you could go out into the workforce, I think that's as far as you could go at that school. And I never thought of anything else. Actually at that time, by that time, I wanted to go out to work and I had no inkling of what I would like to do. I heard of some friends, school friends that we made over there, that they said that they were going to be fitter and turners. So when I thought of going to work, I thought I'd be a fitter and turner but I didn't know what a fitter and turner was, or did. I still don't.

[laughter]

OH: So you worked as a messenger boy for the jewellery shop?

JT: Yes.

OH: Until the February of 19--?

JT: '44. And that's when I went to work as a theatre cleaner and I lasted there from February till October of that year.

OH: Was that your Auntie?

JT: With my Auntie Bruna. But she would start work in the morning at the time that I would be knocking off and going home to sleep. And I did that for six nights a week, that was Monday to Saturday. Sunday night was the only night that I slept at night.

OH: What were your hours?

JT: The hours from 11:00 o'clock at night till 7:30 in the morning --- That was after the last session of the cinema, until 7:30 and then the sessions would start again at 10:00 o'clock in the morning. They used to have four sessions a day, and in those days the cinemas used to be jam-packed every night because that was the only form of entertainment, you know. It was full of the American soldiers like that, you know.

OH: What did it look like at that time, West's theatre?

JT: Well the West was very, for me it was luxury plus because the only cinema I had seen in Italy as a kid was in a tent and they used to do that only on times that there would be a *sagra*¹², as they would say, you know.

OH: Can you describe what it looked like when you went inside West's theatre?

JT: Oh, well, the theatre was ultra-modern at the time and it was a 1940's theme, like that, you know. They were building that at the time that we arrived in Italy, from Italy, I mean.

OH: Where was West's?

JT: West's was, it still exists now, the building is still there but now it's got something to do with the South Australian Music ---

OH: The orchestra?

¹² *Sagra* translates as a festival or social event

JT: Yes.

OH: So it's in Hindley Street?

JT: It was in Hindley Street, yes, it was opposite the beautiful building, that is still beautiful today and it's a shame that the reputation that that part of Hindley Street has got today because that was where the hustle and bustle used to be at that time. The West's Coffee Palace, that was a beautiful building, it still is. And opposite that was the Metro, that doesn't exist today, they demolished that altogether. You see, that was the only form of entertainment and all the big cinemas were all down Hindley Street and Rundle Street.

OH: What was your job there?

JT: My job was at --- the place, we had standard lights that used carry around to where you were doing the work. So it was picking up all the rubbish and vacuum-cleaning all the carpets under the seat, to do all the heavy work and then the women used to come in in the morning and they used to clean all the mirrors, do all the glass work, clean the toilets and all that sort of thing.

OH: So you were really doing night shift?

JT: Oh yes, night shift, six nights a week.

OH: And what did you do during the day?

JT: Sleep. [laughs] And I was a sleepy head. I'd be, I'd go home, have breakfast, go to bed and they had a job getting me up by 9:30 to go to work.

[laughter]

OH: So you worked there for nine or ten months?

JT: Months, yes. And then, because, you know, at that age, my mates that I had, they used to go out at night, they used to go to OBIs ice skating, they used to go dancing at the Palladium and I couldn't go because I had to get my sleep, you know. It, it hurt, to give the job up because I was getting five pounds a week, my father was only getting four pound eight a week. And on top of the five pound a week, I'd come home every morning with at least two or three pounds in loose change, sixpence here, four bit there that used to fall under the seats and like that. So at 16, in eight months I ended up with something like 400 pounds and I had a bankbook of £400. That was more than Dad had --- And that hurt, you know, that really hurt because I went from £5 a week plus all the loose change to 22 and sixpence a week, 48 hours a week.

OH: So what was your next job?

JT: My next job then, you were not allowed going to look for a job, you had to go via what they called the Manpower Office to see what vacancies they had, and choose a job from there.

OH: Johnny, was that because it was the War years?

JT: The War years, yes, yes.

OH: This is at the end of 1944?

JT: Yes.

OH: And you were?

JT: I was 16, turned 16, and --- Yes, I went to the Manpower Office and I said I wanted a job and he said, "What do you want to do?" And I said, "Oh, I just want a job." He said: "But is there something that you would like to do?" And I mentioned something about fitter and turner remembering what the kids used to do, you know, not knowing what it was. And he said, "We've got no vacancies for fitter and turners. And he said, "What else?" I said, "Well, what can you offer me?" And they said, "Would you like to work in a department store?" And I said: "Doing what?" He said, "Serving behind the counter." And I said, "Well, I think I can." I thought to myself I think I can do that. So I said: "Yes." And I remembered them offering the first offer that they made was Myer and for somehow or other that scared me. To me, Myer was a big store, and I thought I'd be lost in the shuffle in there and --- Then he offered, then he mentioned John Martins and I thought that was also a big place. He said, "What about Foy and Gibson's?" which doesn't exist now. And I knew one fellow there, you know and I thought, well, at least I know somebody there. And I said, "Yes, I'd take Foy and Gibson's."

OH: Johnny, where was Foy and Gibson's?

JT: Foy and Gibson's was on the corner of Pulteney Street and Rundle Street which now is a car park.. That has been demolished and it's shame because it was a beautiful building, today, they wouldn't have allowed it to be demolished like that. But anyway, the day that I reported there, I got a hell of a shock, because I don't know what I expected because I thought that I would at least be put in the men's wear, selling shirts and socks and ties and whatever. Instead they put me in the dress material department which I had to deal with all women that used to ask about lingerie material and I didn't even know what lingerie meant. [laughs] I used to blush [laughs] every time they used to ask me that. And I was there in that department --- all the way through until the end of the War --- because during the War, all, there was blackouts, you know. Every home had to have blinds so that you wouldn't see the light coming from the windows, the streets were not lit up and there was no window displays, they were all bagged up with bags of sand and all like that in case of bombings and there was air raid shelters in Victoria Square and Light Square, and things like that, in case of bombings, you know. And we accepted that, that was a thing that was happening, we accepted that. When the War finished --- the bagged sand were taken off and they were left with windows that were empty, these big glass rooms that were empty, you know. I didn't know that there was such a profession as window dressing and keeping windows, I had never heard of it, I had never --- it, I didn't know.

Anyway, they were looking for somebody to dress windows and I got called in the staff manager's office and they said that they wanted me to go into windows and I said, "I don't know what to do in those windows." He said, "We think you can do it. He said, "You'll pick it up, there'll be someone who will teach you." And I said, "I don't think I can do that." Anyway I gave them a bit of a bad time because I wouldn't say, I wouldn't accept it. But at the same time, I thought, well, I'd better not be too hard, I don't want to lose my job. And I said, but I said, "If I do it, what would happen if I can't do it? I said, "Would I still have a job?" And he said, "Well,

we'll put you back in here." So I thought I had nothing to lose so I accepted it which was terrific because at the time, I think I was getting about £7 10 [shillings], a week and I went from £7 ten [shillings] to £13 a week doing window dressing which I had no ideas what I was doing. And from there, it went on. So I used to keep on looking at books and magazines for ideas, and I used to walk up and down, down to Myer to see what they were doing and see it, I used to imitate them, and then from there, it worked off that you were elaborated on that according to what fantasies you had, in mind.

OH: Johnny I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about Foy and Gibson's. Who were the customers who would have gone to Foy and Gibson's?

JT: Well, thinking back, Foy and Gibson's, there was a lot of department stores in those days, they don't really exist any more apart from Myer, that still is around. Foy and Gibson, most of the customers that were there we the real family people, see further down from there in the east used to be the eastern market where all the people that used to grow veggies, used to bring, go down there and used to do the shopping at Foy and Gibson's. They wouldn't go any further down to --- at the time, what was it? Charles Birks and John Martins and Myer and all of that. They used to do the shopping there. So they were very ordinary working people that did the shopping there, and we catered for everything from floor coverings to clothing to even groceries at the time, in there.

OH: How many levels were they? How many floors?

JT: There was five, five, yes, five levels of store and the rest of it was offices and storerooms and things like that.

OH: In your department of the dress material?

JT: Yes.

OH: When you first started, how many people would have worked there?

JT: The department was divided into three sections. There was the wool fabric department, the silk and velvets departments and the cloth department. I was in the silk section and there was five of us behind the counter. And when it started, there was --- if it happened today that we with the traffic flow that we were getting, at that time, that wouldn't exist. But then, see, during the War, you couldn't buy anything. You were issued with coupons, and if you didn't have the coupon, you had the money, but you didn't have the coupons, you couldn't buy anything, you know. So --- things were pretty slow and I was a clock watcher, all the time, and I had nothing to do so you know, apart from keeping the place tidy and rolling up the materials and you used to look for things that would occupy my time so that the time would keep on moving on faster. And I think that was the thing that made them ask me or telling me to get into display because I... nobody taught me but I used to pick out the rolls of materials that were in the shelves and I used to put the colours that blended in with one another and all like that and I don't know where I learned that. It was... I just did it and...

But when they told me to go into the window display, I was scared because the windows, there was fashion, clothing, there was grocery windows, there were carpet windows, they were all like

that. I had to handle all those things, you know. But somehow or other, I worked out because within four years in there, I was put in charge of all the windows and there was 14 windows around, huge big windows and I mean there was windows of ladies' hosiery, for instance, a huge window and you get three boxes of hosiery. How the hell are you going to fill in the window with hosiery? So you had to work a theme out and fantasise something that'll use up the space in there, you know. And or make a prop or something like that. So we used to get --- a list of the window, all the windows were numbered, a list of the windows that you got to do for the week. And I used to go home and think about what I am going to do tomorrow for this window or whatever, and work something from there.

OH: So did the displays change weekly?

JT: Oh yes, every window was changed weekly.

OH: And at the end of four years when you were put in charge, how many people worked for you?

JT: Oh --- there we had five, there was five of us.

OH: You must have had a busy working life, changing so many windows?

JT: Yes, it was concerning me. I was very conscious and scared of not being able to do the job and you know, I was conscious and afraid of being put off because I wasn't doing the job that was required of me, you know. So I was working overtime even when I'd knock off at night, "What am I going to do tomorrow about this?" And I'd be looking through magazines which they used to have in there. Or I'd go into the book department and have a look at anything that might give me some idea of what I could do or what theme I could use or whatever, you know. It was challenging and but somehow or other, I must have had some sort of flair for it otherwise I wouldn't have been able to exist. So I was there for --- 14 years.

OH: (40:21) Johnny, I want to take you back to the War years. I just wanted to check, were your parents naturalised?

JT: No, no. You were not allowed, see that was the thing, if we can go back to that. When we arrived --- we could go anywhere, that's how Dad went up to the mica mines, up there, like that. But four months after we arrived, when Italy entered the War, we became aliens with restrictions. We were aliens, we were not naturalised, you had to be in Australia for five years before you could apply for naturalisation. We were not allowed, not that we could have, we were not allowed to buy property or buy a house unless you were naturalised. And during the War years that we lived in Waymouth Street, to go down to my Auntie Giovanna, in Frogmore Road, Lockleys, we were not allowed to move outside the square mile of Adelaide. Now, there we got a permit from the police station. So if we, ever wanted to go and visit Auntie like that, we had to get, me, even 12 years old, we had to go to the police station and we were finger-printed and that permit was only allowed for that day.

OH: Where was the police station?

JT: It was in Gouger Street somewhere. Yes over near the Central Market somewhere.

OH: So going down on a Sunday for a family lunch?

JT: Yes. Well, no, never for a family lunch because the tram didn't start until 1:00 o'clock on Sunday and we'd go there and I remember once, this is funny part too. I remember once that we had an early lunch and then we came from Waymouth Street to Currie Street to catch the tram. We could see the tram was leaving from King William Street, and if the tram wasn't coming, Mum would say, "Well, let's walk to the next stop." So we would go from the, which was the Adelaide High at the time, we would go there but by the time we got to the next stop, the tram would go past and we were too far in between so we would walk to the next stop and we would walk to the next stop and get like that. And [laughs and sound of interviewer blowing her nose]. The fare was tuppence for us and four pence for Mum so there was ... but I remember this once that we went down that way and the day before, Mum had given had given me a dose of castor oil, I wasn't feeling well. And walking, you know missing the trams in between stops like that, we walked all the way down to Frogmore Road. --- And with me, that nature called because [laughs] of the castor oil, that was fun. I remember, I remember, do you remember Lasscock's? The side street down there of Lasscock used to be all bamboos, I remember I had to run in between the bamboos. [laughs] Is that going to be allowed?

OH: Yes.

OH: (44:30) Johnny, during the War, there were some Italians in the community in South Australia and in Adelaide who were interned?

JT: Yes. One of my uncles was interned but only for a matter of --- couple of months, I think.

OH: Which uncle was that?

JT: Zio Domenico, the one that had the grocery shop in Hindley Street opposite the West End Brewery. And we found out afterwards that he was interned purely because there was --- Fascist sympathisers that used to have meetings and because Uncle had a big house and a big storeroom, they used to ask him, can they use the storeroom to have the meeting. And it didn't worry him, "Have the meeting." But because of that, they thought that he was a sympathiser which he wasn't because the reason of him coming to Australia was to get away from Fascism, you know because they were quite against it, the four brothers were against it, you. So until they found out, I think, the day, I remember the day, the first day that there, in the newspapers that Italy entered the War and the police went around to all, apparently the police were aware of the Fascist sympathisers that existed and they went around picking all these people up and interned them down at Keswick, they were, and Uncle Domenico was one of them. And of course, then, afterwards I think that they would have interviewed them and like that, and found out that he was in the clear so they let him come home.

OH: What was the feeling amongst, say, your relatives about that experience of your Uncle?

JT: --- Well, it wasn't, ah --- We felt, as I said, you know I'm talking about it with the brain of a 12 year old at the time ... we thought that there was something, that we, there was something with us like that you know that we were, some sort of criminals or like that and I couldn't work it out -- how in Italy, if you were a little Fascist, you were --- not a little God, but you were accepted and highly thought of because we were in another country, you were not --- accepted,

sort of thing, you know. But it took me, I think it would have taken, the first through to the second year before that sank through and also being in the atmosphere that we were at school and me seeing with Australian people and other Italians that had been working here that were born here and all that like that, that life wasn't like it was in Italy at that time because we didn't think of War and all like that. The kids that I was going to school with on Saturday afternoon used to go to the movies, to see cowboy movies and all of that. Where, in Italy, we had to go marching and we were put in uniform and trained to exercise and gymnastics and we were given a miniature rifle with its serial number that we had to memorise and know which, who it belonged to. So I, I adapted but you know, pretty well after two years.

OH: Yeah. What about when you were working, the first jobs, the War was still on. Italy had, you know, joined with Germany. Did you ever feel any feelings...?

JT: No, no. If anything, I was treated, I was treated like a --- what would you say? A bit of a novelty of having somebody because I must have been speaking with a very heavy accent and there was some people that I used to work with, there, there was one man especially ...

OH: Is that at Foy and Gibson's?

JT: At Foy and Gibson's. That he asked me, he says, "Johnny." He says, "What do you do on a Sunday?" He says, you know. And I said, you used to go to Mass... that was, I was still going to Mass at that time. And then afterwards... Anyway he invited me home for lunch at his place and I was so proud to be invited by an Australian family and that. Oh, I was nervous about going. I didn't know how to behave or worried about how to behave. And there was a funny thing that happened there the first time that the table was beautifully set out with napkins which we never had.

OH: Where did the family live?

JT: Down at Prospect way, you know. And very nice couple, Very nice family, they had two young daughters. Actually one of the daughters, in years, while we were there, she became a Miss Palmolive. She was a beautiful looking girl. And, anyway we were sitting down at the table and all of that, and I didn't take much notice of ... I mean, when we ate at home, it was pretty basic, you had your plate and your glass and that's it. But here there was cups and saucers and all like that. And it didn't sink into me that here was no glass until the meal, you finish your meal and all of that and out came the teapot for the cup and saucer. I can't stand tea! The thought of having tea used to make me ... goose pimples like that. [laughs] And I said, "Look." I said, "I'm sorry, I can't drink tea." "You don't drink tea? He said, Well what do you drink at home with your meal?" And I said, "A glass of wine." "Wine?" My God, you know, that was an unusual thing. But anyway I can't remember exactly how that ended whether I ended up with a glass of water or a glass of lemonade, I can't remember. But tea, with me, had ... I remember that as a kid, if I didn't feel like going to school, I was never a school lover, really, if I didn't feel like going to school, I used to fake a tummy ache or what do you call that? And the best cure, there was only one cure in those days. A good dose of castor oil, you know. It was hard for me to drink castor oil but somebody put it onto senna¹³, have you ever heard of it? Well, senna, was easier to drink than

¹³ Senna is a laxative made from the senna plant

slimy castor oil but I still couldn't take it and to me, tea tasted the same. So I could never, could never stomach it. [laughs]

OH: 53:08 So your years at Foy and Gibson's were obviously really enjoyable if you stayed for 14 years?

JT: Oh yes, yes. There was only one bad thing that happened to me during the years. When the War was over and the returned soldiers came back from the War and by law, they had to be replaced in the jobs they that left before going to War and one fella that ended up in our department, that was only the person that I can think of in all those years that made me feel like some sort of a freak about being a dagoe, you know. And, in the department, we were all by the manager of the department, each one of the five of us was given a job to do, you know, a certain section to keep tidy and clean and whatever. This fella, right from the beginning, I couldn't take because of his attitude because the way he used to talk to me and the way that he was yapping around, it made me think the way he was talking about his War years as if though he had won the War in Libya all by himself, in Tobruk, he was there, that way, like that. But as I said, I couldn't, the only thing I felt was that he was against me for some reason or other. And, I've got, --- and I found excuse for that and I thought, well, I'm a foreigner and you were down there fighting my people so I tried to make allowances for that, I think, that's the way I was thinking. But anyway because he would never do the job that he was doing, that he was supposed to be doing, but he was yapping like that, all the time. And he used to say, "Oh, John, go and tidy that up over there, will you?" And I thought, "Well, I've been doing all the jobs that I've been told to do and you've done nothing, and you're telling me to do that." Now, he did that two or three times. And one day, I thought, I'll have to and I was scared because he was a returned soldier and because I was a non, not naturalised Australian, like that, I was scared but I didn't think that he was being fair until I said, "Oh, look." I said: "But I've done my job." But I said, "That's your job." And he grabbed me by the arm and shoved me behind, where there was an elevator in our department, behind the elevator and he said, "Listen, you little dagoe." He says, "When I tell you do to do something, you do it or I'll break every bone in your body." You know, I mean, I was shivering before, getting the courage up to go up and say like that but I was terrified by that time and that happened to me other times and I did the job and once, I was used ... living in Weymouth Street, I used to walk to Foy and Gibson's and I used to meet a fella by the name of Mittiga who had a --- a tailoring shop in Hindley Street and he had asked me before, to go and work for him that he'd teach me how to be a tailor. I didn't fancy the thought of sitting down and sewing, and things like that. And I said, "No, I'm happy." He said, "Well, why don't you come and work for me?" And he said, "What are you doing now?" And I said, "I'm working down the Foy and Gibson's." And he said, he says, "Do you know the other Italian man that's down there?" And I said, "No." I said, "I'm the only foreigner that down there, that I know of." And he said, "Are you sure?" And he said, "Yes, yes, there's an Italian man." I said: What's his name. And he told me his name. And I said that we hadn't got anybody by that name there. He said: "I forgot, he changed his name." "What's his name?" "His name is Bill Hall." That was the man that was calling me a little dagoe. And I said, "Are you sure?" "Yes, yes, you know his mother and father, they live in Gray Street just around the corner." And I said, "Yes, I knew the mother and father", like that.

OH: And Johnny, we're going to have to leave it there, right there. And we'll pick that up in the next interview.

JT: Okay.

OH: Thank you.

Fourth interview recorded on 7th July 2012 at Torrensville, South Australia

OH: This is a fourth interview with Johnny Tormena recorded by Madeleine Regan for the Italian market gardeners oral history project. It is recorded on 7th July 2012 at Torrensville, South Australia. Thank you Johnny

JT: My pleasure.

OH: For agreeing to another interview. We're going to follow up the story that you were telling me about at the end of the last interview and the situation when you were at Foy and Gibson's with the returned soldier.

JT: Yes, yes. As, to take up where we left off, was he... I had a giant complex about being an alien and there was something about him being a soldier who fought in the War against my people that I was afraid of him, I suppose you can call it.

OH: Johnny, can you just tell me the ages, your age and the age of this man.

JT: Well, I was.

OH: Approximately.

JT: Sixteen. I was 16 years old and he must have been in his middle 20s, I would say middle 20s, I'm not quite sure about that. But as I said, he kept on spending time talking about the War and what he did on the War and it sounded as though he won the whole battles of Tobruk by himself, you know while I was doing the job that was allotted to me. And each one of us was allotted certain things to do daily but he never did them. When I finished mine, he would always get to me and would say, "John, do that for me." Which were jobs that were supposed to be done by him and I didn't think it was fair and it took me a while to get the courage up to tell him that I had done my job and that was his job. But as I said, as he was a soldier in the War and me being an 'alien', it took me a while to get the courage but finally I did and he threatened me a couple of times telling me that he would break every bone in my body, like that. But one day ---

[Pause in the interview]

JT: But as I said last time, this fella by the name of Mittiga who had a tailoring shop in Hindley Street and I used to meet him sometimes on my way to work, and he, a number of times, he tried to get me to go and work for him and he would teach me to be a tailor which was not... I wasn't interested. And when he told me, when he asked me actually where I was working at Foy and Gibson's and he asked me about this other Italian man and I said that as far as I knew I was the only Italian person in the store. And I asked him his name and when he told me his name, I said that definitely there was nobody of that name here. And he said, "Oh, Oh, I know," he said, "I forgot." He said, "He doesn't use his real name any more. His name now is Bill Hall." --- And I

said: "Bill Hall?" That was the man that was threatening me all the time, you know, calling me a little dagoe. And from going on from there, I chewed on it for a while with the intention of confronting him but I wasn't quite sure whether if he was not the man that he was saying he was. Anyway, eventually it happened. He grabbed me and threatened me and he said, "Listen, you little dagoe." And I pulled away from him and I said, "Don't call me a little dagoe," I said, "Because you're a bigger dagoe than I am." And he said, "What are you talking about?" I said, I know, your name isn't Bill Hall. I know your mother and father, they live around the corner from where I live, in Gray Street." And he froze for a minute and I saw that he looked around and he said, "Have you told this to anybody else?" I said, "No, not yet." And that finished, you know. I wasn't quite satisfied with finishing it off like that so I said, "Just a minute." I said: "Why did you change your name?" And he said to me: "You'll learn as you get older." I said, "What will I have to learn?" He said: "That they will treat you better here," he said, "If they think you're one of them." --- Which I guessed that he meant by that, if people think that I'm an Australian. And I said, "No, no, no". I said: "I've been here now for a year or so and the only person who ill-treated me here was you." --- And that finished off. Within about a fortnight, he had given notice and he'd left the company and I heard later that he had moved to Melbourne. And I've never seen him since.

OH: Would you have talked to your parents about that situation?

JT: I can't, I can't remember whether I did or not, really. --- I must have, I must have mentioned it but I can't remember because I have no recollection of them giving me advice on how to treat it whether to ignore it or whatever it was. No, I can't remember.

OH: A difficult situation to have been in as a young man?

JT: Well, it was because as I said, you know, my --- my complex about being a foreigner during the War where the country I came from was against the country of my, of our, choosing that I as living in now, scared me and I didn't, I didn't know what could have happened and you know, standing up to a fellow that just came back after fighting his country which wasn't his country. [laughs] Really, I don't know, I've never found whether he was born here of Italian parents here.

OH: We've just got to pause for a minute.

OH: We're resuming the interview after an interruption. Johnny you were talking about the feeling you had about being an 'alien'?

JT: Yes. --- And that lasted all through the War and I never had how did you say? Any cause of worrying about it in my 13, 14 years that I was working at Foy and Giboson's other than that person that I mentioned ever treated me bad. If anything, I felt as I was treated as being a bit of a novelty, spoke with a heavy accent, and as a funny little fella.

OH: And your parents didn't experience any of those feelings?

JT: No, never. And I think that maybe the reason with them was that my father worked for a company called Del Fabbro brothers and all of that. They were Italians. And my mother did jobs for these boarding houses and all of that, and they were all owned by Italians so she didn't feel anything like that, you know. It was never mentioned with them at all.

OH: (01:31) In the time that you were working as a young man...

JT: Yes.

OH: At Foy and Gibson's what was happening in your family life? Can you give me some idea about how your family was living at that time?

JT: Oh well, both Mum and Dad, I think --- they were never short of money. I mean we were not rich, we worked and both Mum and Dad worked but they, all their young married life in Italy, they didn't know where the next shilling was going to come from. And instead, here, there was always money there and there was not a bank account but the money was there all the time. So it was peaceful for them. They had to work for it but they saw results, where in Italy, it wasn't there, you know? No, Mum always said that Australia was, for her, like heaven-sent, after the life she had as a kid when the First World War and then after, you know, with Fascism rising and unemployment and all that sort of stuff, you know.

OH: Your parents socialised with relatives?

JT: Yes. Well, when I say socialise, yes we frequented each other because that was prior to television so we used to visit each other. That was an outing on the weekend, to go and visit each other. Yes, there wasn't parties, you know, you'd go and you'd spend a good afternoon with them and then you'd end up saying, "Well, stay for tea." And all we did was just talk, I mean there was no [sighs] no music, no television, just talking. Most of it was talking old time, what life was like when they were young and how it was now with things were a lot better.

OH: (03:57) I'd like to ask you about when you visited your Aunt and Uncle Giovanna and Bruno Rebuli and what their place was like? If you can talk about going there?

JT: Well, you mean their home?

OH: Yes, and their garden?

JT: Well, the houses was very basic, you know. But as compared to where we came from, where you had a kitchen and a bedroom, there was no such thing as a lounge room. There was no radios or whatever it is, and my entertainment back at the village at the time, there was certain stables that people frequented more than other families. It all depended on the type of people who were in there, the people who were good storytellers and things like that. And I used to look forward to those evenings, staying there and listening to them discussing about the War and about the gardens and what they had to do and you know ---

OH: And the Rebuli's lived on Frogmore Road, Valetta Road?

JT: Yes.

OH: And what was their house like?

JT: The house, yes, as I said, very basic. They had three bedrooms, the Uncle and Auntie and one for the three boys and for the one girl that they had. And there was no such thing as I said, a lounge room or family room or whatever. You entertained the people in the kitchen and around the table and that's the way it was.

OH: What do you remember about their gardens?

JT: Well, I remember I had never seen or never heard before of glasshouse of fruit and tomatoes being grown inside a glasshouse. And that was a novelty for me and I used to love going to see how they used to do it, what they used to do with it and how they used to pick the fruit and how they used to box it and then take it to the market once a week to sell it. That was all very new to me.

OH: (06:27) What about in the area that they lived in along Frogmore Road? Did you ever visit other families there?

JT: Well, I was a good friends with the two brothers of the Tonellato. Their name, that wasn't their real name that I knew them on, I knew them as Nino and Nano and we used to leave the city because at the time, we lived in Waymouth Street and we used to catch the tram down to Frogmore Road and get off and walk off or else they'd be waiting at, to catch the tram at the end of Frogmore Road and we would all go down to Henley Beach and spend the Sundays there, diving off the jetty and to me, that was luxury.

OH: You were telling me about visiting the Tonellato's in their home?

JT: Yes, they lived, the boys, slept in, a carriage that I found out, later on, that the carriage belonged to the would-be King of England, the one that abdicated and married Mrs Simpson.¹⁴ And I don't know how the carriage ended up in Adelaide but it was up for sale and the Tonellato family bought it and had it transported in their farm. And they used to sleep in there and I thought it was luxury, I would have loved to have had one of those in my backyard.

[laughter]

OH: What do you remember about the carriage or they called it the *vagon*?

JT: The *vagon*, *si*. yes, that's what they used to call it. If I'd go in there and I see the mother and father and I'd say: "Where's Nino and Nano?" "They're in the *vagon*." [laughter]

OH: What do you remember about the *vagon*?

JT: Well, I, well, you see, I had only been in a train once in Italy and that was when we left Italy from Cornuda which is the nearest station to our village to go to Genova to catch the ship so I had never been in a train before that and --- I don't know, I couldn't see because I mean to actually live in a *vagon*, to sleep in there and use it as a home, it was unusual for me, you know. And maybe that's the thing that attracted me like that, that I wished I had one in my backyard.

OH: Do you remember what it looked like inside?

JT: Oh, it was elaborately done. The upholstery, the walls, naturally it was royalty, you know. Yes, it was beautifully done, you know.

¹⁴ The carriage or *vagon* was built for the 1927 Royal visit of the Duke and Duchess of York. He became King George VI in 1937 after his brother, Edward abdicated.

OH: When you went to see Tonellato boys, what was their garden area like? What was it like along Frogmore Road?

JT: It was very primitive, you know. The house, there was no such thing like that have today that houses have got the terrace out there with outdoor living and lawn and all of that. They didn't have all that. It was strictly a farming house with the basic things in there. There was no flower garden or things like that. It was very, very basic, you know. But that was the way of life, it wasn't as if they were singled out that way, everybody else lived in that way. They were more concerned in growing vegetables because that was the thing that brought in the money to live.

OH: If you walked along Frogmore Road in those days, what would you have looked at?

JT: Well, Frogmore Road, from the bridge, towards and going towards Valetta Road, as I Remember it was not bitumenised and then, at Valetta Road, I remember we used to go after we came back from the beach, we used to go on the left and there was a whole lot of fruit trees lining the side of the street and we used to go and pinch the fruit off there. [laughs]

OH: What sort of fruit?

JT: There was --- what do you call them? Not peaches. Nectarine, nectarines and ther was hazelnuts, what else? And there was olive trees, you know.

OH: This is along Valetta Road?

JT: Along Valetta Road, on the side. The row of trees were forming like a fence to the garden at the back, you know so there was no fences that you had to jump. Anybody could have walked along taking something off it. It wasn't yours but it belonged to the council, I suppose, we suspected. .

OH: Was that on the river side or on the other side?

JT: The river side.

OH: Did you have a sense that you were in a different part of Adelaide when you were there?

JT: Oh yeah. Yes, because the only thing that I knew about Adelaide we were at Waymouth Street because we ended up in Waymouth Street after the first 12 months when my father came back from the mica mines and he managed to find this house which had what three bedrooms and a kitchen and a walk-in room that led to the three bedrooms. So that's the only type of house that I could compare it with in the way that they lived like even where my Auntie Giovanna Rebuli was. All the houses were very, very basic. It took years before people started to build houses and add a bit of well, glamour to it or something like that.

OH: Did you also visit your Uncle Gelindo on his farm?

JT: Yes. On his farm? I often used to be sent down there to bring his lunch from and that was only on days that we weren't at school. I used to go gladly because I didn't, we didn't own a push bike and I used to love pushing the bike and so Auntie had the bike and she'd give me the basket to bring down for lunch. And to me, it was an outing.

OH: So this was when your family were living in Waymouth Street?

JT: In Waymouth Street.

OH: And you'd take your Uncle his lunch?

JT: Yes.

OH: Down at Pierson Street?

JT: In Pierson Street Lockleys and the farm ended up right at the by the river because they used to pump the water up, to water the glasshouses from the river.

OH: (14:36) Johnny, what about your father? Can you tell me a little bit more about what happened to your father?

JT: Well, Dad, as I said, when he came back from the mica, mica mines --- I can't remember how he ended up working for Del Fabbro's but he was there for a number of years and then he became good friends with two other people and I can't think of their names now and they wanted to start a business on their own and they wanted Dad to be a partner. So there was going to be three partners but that happened at the time that, before they actually formed this partnership and worked together, that Dad very suddenly, within three days, he passed away. And that was exactly ten years, he always told his friends in Italy before we left, he said, "I'm only going for ten years and then I'm coming back." And instead ten years after, he passed away.

OH: How old was he when he died?

JT: Forty nine.

OH: And how old were you, Johnny?

JT: At the time, well I was --- '49, I was 23. Yes, because I was born in 1927 and in 1950, yes, 23.

OH: How did that affect your mother and the plans?

JT: My mother actually scared me because she went to pieces. It happened too fast, three days and one day, you're a worker, the next day, you're finished. I remember he took the day off and I had to translate for him and take him to the doctor on a Thursday and after he examined him and all of that, he said, he made an appointment to see a specialist for the Monday and instead on the Tuesday, we were burying him --- on the Friday night, on the Saturday morning that I went to work because we had to work, I was working 48 hours a week in those days, everybody worked 48 hours a week, and Mum said before I left, she said: "You'd better get in touch with the doctor that we saw on Thursday because your Dad didn't sleep all night that he couldn't breathe, that he couldn't, whatever. So I went to see the doctor, I asked at work can I go and see the doctor and he gave me a prescription to get some tablets. When I went home, we gave him the tablet and --- my Auntie who was living with us at the time, that was my Auntie, the sister that he sent for, over there, that was living with us at the time, was sitting there by him and she came and called Mum, "Severina, Severina, you'd better come in." She said, "He's going all blue." And, you know, I

went in and Mum called out. She said, "Go and call the doctor, go and call the doctor." I couldn't get in touch with the doctor, he had gone to the football with his kids.

So we rang an ambulance and I had to go with the ambulance at the Adelaide hospital and I was in there while they took him in and examined him, and the next thing, they came out and tells me, "I'm sorry, we couldn't save him, he's gone." And that was a hell of a shock because we've been very lucky health-wise, the whole four us; my sister, myself, Mum and Dad, never seen a doctor in our lives, you know. And bang! There it was. And Mum went to pieces, she wouldn't eat, she wouldn't, she went to bed, she didn't even come to the funeral. She went to bed, Auntie was trying to get her to eat she couldn't eat and things like that and when she got up you could see that she had been --- that she was sick. So it took --- at least a couple of weeks for her to get up in the morning and to be coaxed up like that. It was a hell of a shock, we weren't used to that sort of thing, you know.

OH: When you said that your mother didn't go to your Dad's funeral, was that unusual?

JT: I don't know because I --- I don't know, I hadn't been to any funerals that I can remember whether, you know, where a partner, a mother or a father died and whether the partner went to the funeral or not, I don't know. --- I've no idea, you know. She just could not... all she kept on saying, "He's gone. He's gone and he's never said a word to me, without saying a word." Then she kept on saying that we didn't know how to handle it.

OH: And so you and Maria attended the funeral?

JT: Yes.

OH: With other relatives?

JT: Yes. My, his, Dad's sister and Anna-Maria, her daughter, and naturally, the other relatives like the Rossetto's and all of that were there. As a matter of fact, Gelindo was in Italy at the time, his first visit to Italy in 1950 from the early '20s when he came to Australia.

OH: (20:42) What effect then did your father's death have in respect to what your family did next?

JT: Well, I --- I suppose you could call it, all of a sudden, Dad who was the head of the family, Mum went to pieces, I suppose I was --- thought, you know or treated as the man of the family, you know because if you had to go to --- get some legal things done, they had to send me, they were sending me. It was no good sending my sister, she was only 13 or 14. It took a while and then, also is that --- [sighs] the, we didn't have much room in that house that we were in there because we had Auntie Bruna and *zio* Beppi, her husband living with us including my father's sister and her daughter so we were all crammed up and they weren't building houses in those days.

They didn't start building houses until the middle to late '50s. --- And so we started looking around at houses for sale and around the corner from us in Gray Street, there was an Abrahams and he was mixed up into land, selling, buying and selling houses and things like that, you know. And we heard about this house that we found in Gilbert Street, Gilberton who he handled and he was instrumental in getting it for us. We didn't have, we had to get a mortgage which he arranged

and so we moved out of there and you know, it was spacious, we had a garden at the back and it was right across from a butcher's shop. You know, it was a step up from --- starting from Bigolino and the farmhouse, and then getting in one room above *zio* Gelindo, *zio* sorry, Domenico's shop to three rooms in Currie Street and then four rooms in Waymouth Street, and now we had a whole house all to ourselves.

OH: It must have felt pretty good when that happened?

JT: Yes.

OH: I imagine.

JT: Yes.

OH: So what year did you buy the house there in Gilberton?

JT: Ah, it was in --- 1951. Dad died on 15 July 1950 and we moved into the house, I remember it was the Easter weekend because we, it was a holiday that I could be at home, Friday and Saturday and Sunday and we shifted into the house on the Easter weekend in 1951.

OH: (24:20) You left Foy and Gibson's at the end of the year in 1955?

JT: '55, yes.

OH: After 14 years there?

JT: Yes, yes.

OH: Why did you decide to leave?

JT: Well, I didn't actually decide to leave, I went and asked because I was very conscious, I didn't want to *lose* my job because I was happy, by that time, I was made manager of the window display. That took, they transferred me to window display in 1949 and by that time, by 1955 or even, no, earlier than that. It was in 1953, Mum went back to Italy in 1953 because we had left the house in Italy rented and we had no intention of going back to live and it was just a problem anyway. So Mum went over there to sell the house and during that time, when Foy and Gibson management got me into display and it was at that time that --- I was asked to be in charge of display down there. So I was display manager, I suppose you'd call it for nearly five --- yes, no, hold on, I'm wrong. I was made into display at Christmas 1950. That I was made the display manager, I was display manager while Mum was away.

JT: (26:12) And so I was display manager for five years before and when and I lived, I wanted to go back and see Venice. I had never seen Venice and I wanted to go back and see Venice, and I took on extra jobs, I was doing dressing windows for different boutiques around down at Glenelg. I was dressing the windows once a month, the Gas Company, once a month. I was doing ushering at the Piccadilly Cinema three nights a week, all to get money first of all to pay off the mortgage on the house and then saving to go overseas which I did in --- January 8th 1956, I got on the 'Orion' and off to Italy, got off in Naples.

OH: And did you have to resign from Foy and Gibson's?

JT: No, sorry, I was meant to say that. I went and told the management what I intended to do but I said, in those days, you didn't think of going by plane, you had to go by ship. So that was almost a month on the ship, you know, so you couldn't say, I'm going for two months because it took a month to get there and a month to get back. So I said: It might take a little while. And they said, "Well, we'll deal with... Who can you nominate that can look after things?" Which I did, and as a matter of fact, that fell, I went to his funeral only about a month ago, the one that took over. He was a German, he was in display in Berlin, very, very good. Anyway, he looked after that. When I did the same thing with the job that I had at the Piccadilly and I said, I'm going away, and they gave me a letter of introduction

[sound of interviewer blowing her nose]

JT: To the J Arthur Rank organisation in London.¹⁵ He said: "If you run out of money and you're in trouble," he said: "Present this letter to the head office over there and they'll give you a job." Which I did, I took it, I didn't run out of money but I thought that I'd like the experience of working in another country and I went to see them and they put me onto a cinema called the Dominion Theatre in Tottenham Court Road, I'll always remember that. And it was just across the road from a fantastic, big department store of ... called Foyles. I used to spend my lunchtime going through the books department there. And I stayed there for --- four months, four months until, yes until June and in June I came back when the summer time started and I started hitch-hiking around, you know. Before leaving Australia, I'd made myself a member of the youth movement, Youth Hostel movement which I could go to these places and it only cost two shillings a night which was terrific, you know. You slept in dormitories with that many people from different countries in there but that was an experience so I went through France there, and I went through Spain and then I went through Switzerland, yeah.

OH: And Italy?

JT: Oh, naturally, Italy. [laughs]

OH: (30:36) So you went back to Bigolino?

JT: Certainly, yes.

OH: What was that experience like?

JT: What?

OH: To go back to Bigolino?

JT: Oh, fantastic, it was fantastic because I met a lot of, a lot three or four that I became good friends with, that I used to go to school together when, you know Grade 3, 4 and 5 over there. And we became good friends. And while I was there --- the three friends that we were very thick with each other down there, one migrated to Peru, one migrated and he was working in Frankfurt Germany, the other one because a chauffeur for a countess that lived in Milan. And they were, they had their holidays like *Ferragosto*,¹⁶ as they call it over there. And I was there from

¹⁵ The J Arthur Rank Organisation owned film studios and had more than 250 cinemas in the UK

¹⁶ *Ferragosto*, a feast day celebrated in Italy, marks the summer holiday period in mid August across Italy

Australia so there was Australian, German, a Peruvian [laughs] and a Milanese. [laughs] They used to call us the four musketeers.

[laughter]

OH: Johnny, what about relatives there? Did you have many relatives?

JT: Well, I had...

[sound of a pen hitting the floor]

JT: On Mum's side, Mum's brother, the only one that remained back in Italy, he had three sons -- - but the oldest one, was the equivalent, at Valdobbiadene, he was the director of electrical, ENEL, like here the Electricity Trust or something like that, you know. The other one was a bricklayer and the third one, was impaired, you know, he couldn't read or write, you know, but a very nice fella. If anything, he was the better looking of the three. Unless you heard him talk, you would never know he was impaired.

OH: Did you have any strong feeling about your connection to Bigolino?

JT: Oh, yes. Well, even today the people make fun of me because I talk about Bigolino all the time. And there's other friends we made over there that every time that I go over there, and there's one particular fellow and he's [Alessio]

Caldart. He's an agent for --- glasses, sunglasses. He even came to Australia selling sunglasses. And every time he sees me over there, and he says, "Hello *cangurio*."¹⁷ He says, "When are you going back home?" [laughs] And I said, "Hey, what do you mean?" You know, I said, "In Australia they say why don't you go back to Italy?" And I said, "And I come over here where I was born." I said, "When are you going back to Australia?"

[laughter]

OH: Did you have any feelings yourself about that like you know, Australian, Italian?

JT: No, no. Well, I got over that complex I had down there. I'm equally as proud of being Australia as I am of being Italian, you know. And when people talk about the Mafia and all like that, I said, not all of Italy is Mafia or whatever. No, no. I love Italy and I love Bigolino and I love our, what do you call it? But I'm equally as happy, or if somebody told me here that and I want to go to Italy for what do you call it? And they told me, you might have trouble coming back, they won't let you back. I would never do it because this is my home now.

OH: (35:13) You became naturalised, didn't you?

JT: Yes, as soon as I turned 21 I became naturalised. I waited until then because I can't remember how long after the War was over that first of all, you had to be here five years but I can't remember how long, whether as soon as the War was over, whether you could apply for it, like that. But something in my mind feels that I put it off until I was 21 because I thought that if I did it now, I would have to do it with my mother and father's what do you call it? And then, I

¹⁷ *Canguro* is the Italian word for kangaroo.

might have to do it again when I'm 21 off my own bat. So I thought I'd wait until I'm 21 and then I don't have to dip in on Mum and Dad for it.

OH: And did your parents also become naturalised?

JT: Oh, no, Dad didn't have the chance to do that. Mum did, yes. And Maria, my sister, she became with the mother.

OH: Because she was under...?

JT: She was under age. And what I thought that might happened if I did it at the time that I might have to do it again, I shouldn't have worried because if I was going with Dad and be that, I wouldn't have had to do it again when I was 21 off my own bat. Because Maria still, you know, she went with Mum and she is, she's never had to redo her off her own bat.

OH: (36:58) And you came back to Adelaide?

JT: Yes.

OH: And I understand that you did something quite entrepreneurial in 1957?

JT: Oh, the coffee lounge? Yes. What gave me the idea on that was that when I was working in London, coffee lounges and coffee bars were very in and Adelaide, if anything, at that time was very slow on the uptake. It wasn't like Melbourne and Sydney that were keeping with all that. Adelaide was like a country town, like that. And I wanted...

[sound of interviewer blowing her nose]

JT: To do something and bring in the coffee in a town that all they knew was tea. But it worked, you know, First I wanted to do something different not just a counter with something like that. So we turned it into --- like a nightclub. We had a dance floor, piped music, you got served at the tables. We only light meals and cappuccinos and all like that.

OH: Johnny, can you tell me where the coffee lounge was? It was called Las Vegas?

JT: Yes. And it was on the corner of Hindmarsh Square, I don't know whether you remember... yes, you must remember. There's two big department buildings there now that happened only in the last two or three years where the Academy cinemas was. On that corner and it was upstairs. We used to sit about 120 people.

OH: How did you get the idea to come together because you must have leased?

JT: Oh yes, leased, we went around looking for places

OH: Who's we?

JT: Because people --- you had to, people in Adelaide were slow in picking up things, you know. When, you had to look for places that people could get by tram or bus. Today, they go to restaurants, they go, to Murray Bridge to restaurants and something like that. But in those days we were discouraged by, oh I was discouraged by people who'd say, "Oh, you're going too high for Adelaide, you know. You're going to be in trouble, people are not going to go." And the

beginning of that because we started that we were charging 2/6 for a cappuccino and I remember on the first week that we were there, people were coming out of the cinema and they'd come up there. It was like having a night out. And they go out with their girlfriend and they would maybe even dance and have a cup of coffee and a cappuccino like that. And then you'd charge them 2/6. "2/6 for a cup of coffee?", he said. He said, "Mate", he said, "That it's it." He said, "You won't see me here again. You won't last a month." Well, we were there for four years.

OH: Were you in partnership with someone?

JT: Yes.

OH: Who was the partner?

JT: His name was Brian Webber, I couldn't afford it by myself because it was just a year after I came back from overseas. You know, but I paid. I had to borrow money but I paid my debt within the first ten months that we were there. But we had to work seven days and nights a week. And on Friday night, Saturday night, it was 4:00 or 5:00 o'clock in the morning. And getting up the next day, we couldn't afford or we didn't want to, pay somebody to vacuum clean and clean the place up. We used to go up early to clean it up ready for the lunch hours and things like that.

OH: What was it like inside? What was the interior like?

JT: Oh, well, purely window-dressing. [laughs]

[sound of coughing]

OH: What do you mean by that? Oh, we've got some photos here. Okay, can you describe them to me what the photos?

JT: There's the entrance, there's the bar, that's the coffee machine.

OH: So, is this a Gaggia?

JT: The Gaggia, yes. And that was quite a novel thing in those days. See, window-dressing? You know an old frame for an old what do you call it? A few yards of white satin

OH: And this was a picture frame?

JT: A picture frame, an empty picture frame and I picked up an old miniature model of a corset and stripped it off and painted it white. And hung it in there.

OH: So these swathes of white satin?

JT: Draped through there, mmnn...

OH: And you had how many tables?

JT: I can't remember how many tables now but anyway there's the entrance.

OH: Yeah.

JT: And by the way, that, how we started off, but it became so popular, the room next door was available so we knocked a hole in there, I don't know whether I have a photo of that. We knocked a hole in there that went into the next room. No, I haven't. See that was the other place. We went and knocked up an old dried branch and painted it white and tried to give it a bit of glamour and it was a novelty in Adelaide at the time, you know.

OH: This feature wall behind the bar, is that corrugated iron?

JT: No, it was masonite at the back and they had corrugated, what do you call it, strips of timber, cornices like that and nailed that far apart, so you could get a bit of colour, from the back.

OH: And did you do that work yourself?

JT: Yes.

OH: You made it?

JT: Window-dressing, as I said. [laughs] Window-dressing.

OH: And I'm looking at the carpet.

JT: The carpet and there's the dance floor.

OH: The carpet's unusual.

JT: Yes, it was very, yes, very modern at the time. It fitted in with the style of that at the back.

OH: It's quite geometric.

JT: Mmmn.

OH: What was your colour scheme?

JT: Well, the ceiling was painted blue because then we had spotlighted it with dimmers to create atmosphere. And then we had table lamps, see? [shows the photo] So you could have dimmers but you had your own table lamp if you wanted light. --- Where is it? We hosted even, that was the cast of 'The Cherry Blossom' show that came on at the Theatre Royal. There's one of the waiters, that was my partner and that was me.

OH: How long did you run the Las Vegas for?

JT: Four years.

OH: What were the hours of operation?

JT: Oh --- well, from midday until 2:30 for lunch. Then it was, nothing would happen there, and so we'd close it and we'd open it again at 6:00. And we'd go from 6:00 until about 1:00, 2:00, 3:00 o'clock in the morning.

OH: And what kind of food did you offer people?

JT: Well, as I said light snacks, spaghetti with meat sauce so Mum used to make us these big saucepans of spaghetti sauce and we used to have meat sauce on toast. --- And continental cakes when they were first coming into what do you call it? We created a few specialty ice creams in tall cylinder glasses and different cool drinks like, I don't know whether you do, do you know Giorgio Masero? No? Anyway he's an Italian and he used to make liqueurs and he created, there was a cherry liqueur, there was a *menta*¹⁸ liqueur, there's an *amarena*. They were new things that you didn't see in milk bars and again, it was presentation in the cylinders, we used to get them on --- jelly crystals and dip them so it would have jelly crystals on the top with a slice of lemon or a slice of... It was all things that you didn't get, even, because there was no restaurants, the only Italian restaurants that came up soon after that or during that period was Allegro's. But even then, they didn't worry too much about the presentation bit. But I suppose it was a bit of Hollywood, I suppose.

OH: How many people did you employ?

JT: Well, there was my sister, there was my mother, there was my Auntie who used to come and do the washing, the washing up. So my mother and my partner's mother used to do the cooking and then we had an Austrian woman and you might have heard of her? Her name is Trudy Pohl. You've heard of her? Well, she was our top chef, in there if you can call her chef. She used to do the cooking. When we closed, she went off and she started a --- she designed bikinis and she had a boutique in Melbourne Street, North Adelaide. She used to do facials and things like that. She used to arrange groups and take them to Austria and all of that, snow skiing and things like that. So she built up after she left. But she had just arrived, and actually she was pregnant at the time that when we employed her and she had time off to give birth to her child and then came back with us, and she was with us for two or three years.

OH: Was Las Vegas licensed?

JT: No, no. We would have liked to because we had that many inquiries for wedding receptions and things like that but they all wanted... but the owner was such a staunch and he wouldn't permit. So we missed out on a lot of things at the time because of that. We then had a friend that came over that taught us how to make *gelati* but you had to have a licence and the Council wouldn't let us have a licence because we were going to be in competition with Amscol¹⁹. Can you believe that?

OH: Johnny, we're going to finish this interview now and we'll pick it up to just finish off the story of Las Vegas.

JT: [laughs]

OH: So thank you very much.

JT: Okay.

¹⁸ These names refer to flavours: *menta* is mint and *amarena* is sour black cherry

¹⁹ Amscol (Adelaide Milk Supply Co-Operative Limited) was an Adelaide ice-cream factory which operated in the city from 1922 until the 1980s

Italian market gardeners oral history project

Interview No: 5 with Johnny Tormena OH872/18, 7 July 2012

OH: This is a fifth interview recorded with Johnny Tormena for the Italian market gardeners oral history project. It's recorded by Madeleine Regan on 7th July 2012 at Torrensville. Thanks Johnny, we were talking in the last interview about your business at Las Vegas,

JT: Yes.

OH: The coffee lounge, one of the first coffee lounges in Adelaide.

JT: Yes.

OH: And I was going to ask you, who were your clientele at the coffee lounge?

JT: Well, mostly the lunch hour clientele were all business men and office people that used to work around the area. In the evening a lot of those business people, if they had a night out, they would always end up coming for coffee or supper or whatever. But mainly at night, it was the young ones that wanted something some night life with a bit of a difference. And so we used to sit 120 people and you know, from about half past eight at night until about 2:00 or 3:00 o'clock in the morning the place was full and there was always a turnover of tables. If anything there was a lot of people waiting at the door for a table.

OH: What was your role there? What did you do?

JT: Well, a bit of everything, serving on the tables, --- coaxing the customers and whatever and all that sort of thing, making sure that the dishes we were doing and the drinks that we were doing, were spot on because at the time, the prices we were charging, could you say, were unheard of in Adelaide because you didn't pay any more than a shilling for a cup of coffee or a cup of tea where we were charging 2/6 and we were charging three shillings for a menta drink which was a cool drink with different flavours from the flavours that were commonly sold around Adelaide at the time. Pastries that were a novelty at the time, you know. We didn't, we kept away from pies and pasties because we wanted to, that was old hat.

OH: You know the Gaggia coffee machine

JT: Mmmn.

OH: Where did you buy that from?

JT: I can't remember where we got that from. The first Gaggia coffee machine that I'd heard of at that time was at the Mocha Bar on the corner of Morphett Street, Morphett Street bridge and Hindley street. If you remember, they used to call it the Italian corner? And that was the first time that I saw it there. I think, I can't remember now, but I think that it was through them that they put us on from where to get it from and they came to connect it.

OH: How different was the experience that you were offering your clientele at Las Vegas from other places that people would go to?

JT: As far as I know, the difference was that we served people at the table. The only places that they served people at the table was at hotels at lunchtime and hotels at the time, there was no variety in the meals that you could order in there. Everything was a roast and three boiled veggies an all that sort of thing. There was nothing than that. And you got served by waiters there but there was no restaurants around. You had no competition, you know. And I think that it was the competition that it took a long time to come.

OH: The decision to close, can you tell me a little bit about that?

JT: Yes, I think that after, on the, say on the fourth year, we started, it started to wear on us. You know, we were together for seven days and nights a week -- we started to pick on something, you know, an ashtray that wasn't cleaned properly, on stupid little things like that and being tired and I was always sleepy head, you know and I wasn't getting enough sleep. It got to the point that we thought we'd better part company. We had offers of people to buy, but the owner would not come across it because he didn't believe in it, he wanted us there and we said if you don't allow us to sell which we've got, I'd like you to talk to the people that are interested in it. He accepted the offer to talking to them and thinking that, you know, maybe he'll see the light but when we went back and he said, "Oh..." "Is it okay for us to go ahead?" "Oh, no, he says, I'm happy with you to be there, I don't want you to leave." So we said: "Okay." We drastically we said: "We've had enough and we're closing." "Oh," he said, "You've got a good little business here." He said, "You won't leave." And he left and went overseas. And while it happened and while he was overseas, we decided to get the auctioneers in, give us a price, put a price on everything and we had an auction and sold the place.

But in the meantime --- our customers got a whiff that we were closing and the business people that we had every day, used to be, some of them, well, two or three of them knew me from Foy and Gibson's in display, and asked me, "Well, what are you going to do, John?" And I said, "Oh, I think I'll go back to what I was doing before, I was happy there." Yeah, but Foy and Gibson's is not there any more." And I said, "Oh no, there are other stores." And he said: "Where would you go, down to Myers?" And I said, "No, I'm not keen about Myers." And I said: "Certainly don't want to go to Miller Anderson's or Cox Foy's." And he said, "Well, where then?" Well, Charles Birks was in the process of turning into David Jones, you know, and I thought, not there. So I said, "John Martins." He said, "You'd like to go there, would you?" And I said, "Yeah, I think I'll go and see if they have got a vacancy." And he says, "Okay, I'll get you there." And I said, "What do you mean, do you know whether they've got a vacancy?" He says, "I don't know." And I said, "Well, how are you going to get me there?" He said: "John, trust me, if you want to go there, I'll get you there,"

OH: Was he connected with John Martins?

JT: He was one of the suppliers he was with Berlei corsetry, the name was Robert Lees, you know. And we used to get along very well with him because I think I used to go a little more overboard with him because when I used to ask him for something if there was a window display of Berlei corsetry and I would ask him for certain things and he would make them right, and he

used to come and photograph the windows that he used to send to his head office and it did something for him too, you see. And that's how it went. He took me in there, they interviewed me and he introduced me to one of the top directors there, one of the associate directors in the fashion field up there. And he said, "Meet John Tormena. He said, "I've known John for a long time, he used to be display manager at Foy and Gibsons. He had his own business, he's had enough and he wants to get back to the same game. And guess what?" He says, "You're lucky he's chose this store as the place." [laughs] And I'm looking down on the floor and getting embarrassed. And so he said, "Oh, Foy and Gibson's, did you?" and I said, "Yes." "Do you know Wilfred Taylor?" And I said, "he was my first boss at Foy and Gibson's." So he calls him in, he was now at John Martins and he boosted me up too so I thought that's terrific. [laughs]

OH: When did you start there, Johnny?

JT: I started there on 16th January 1960. And I finished there on 14th of August 1988.

OH: So you had 28 years?

JT: Twenty-eight years. And that was --- I was as happy there and it was a very satisfying job, it was terrific, I got to travel with the directors. And for one time, we travelled for 11 weeks and we went to 17 countries.

OH: Can you tell me how that happened, that trip?

JT: It happened... within two years that I started there, I was put in charge of the windows and we had 34 windows around the city store alone.

OH: How often did you have to change them?

JT: Every week, every week. I had a staff of seven at the time. And I had to make out the rosters for the following week and everybody knew what window they were doing and what they had to do and if we had a theme to follow, you know, so all that was taken care of. And --- in 1967, was their centenary, John Martins centenary and they planned a big, big promotion after 100 years and my --- boss, at the time, was supposed to get it altogether and none of the 34 windows was going to have merchandise in it. Each store window was to promote a government, a state, what do you call it? Department, you know, who? The army, the air force, the police department, all of these, you know, each one was to tell a story about it. We had collected artefacts with copy to tell with each artefact that was there. It was a massive thing, like that. But my boss was not the very, he was a very disorganised person, you know. He had telephone numbers in little bits of papers all over the place, you didn't know who it was, what it was doing and all of that.

A fortnight before the opening, he had a nervous breakdown, and they had to call an ambulance to take him away. I got called in the office and he said, "John, what do you know about so and so?" I said, "I'm all arranged", because my function was only with the 34 windows, I had all those under control. But there was a lot of things happening inside, as well that I didn't know anything about, you know and I wasn't... Anyway, I got called in there. And he said, "You've got to take over." "What?" I said, "But I don't know..." Anyway, for three days and nights, I hardly slept worrying about it because I didn't know what was happening. I had formed a ---- what do you call it? Of each window, I had a folder for each window with everything that was going to go in it with all the copy and everything like that, you know. But nothing about the inside. And he said, "Well, he's got all the phone numbers." I said, "Yeah, but those phone numbers, if I'm going to ring up, I don't who is going to answer, I don't know which department it is. I don't know

what's done with it and what he's got promised and whatever." Anyway. --- We got around it and honestly they couldn't have been more ... what do you call it? Because the directors made available the maintenance department, the painters, the carpenters, the electricians and all of that to do anything that I asked for, you know, to support me in all way. In two weeks, he had four or five months to look after all of this and he didn't do it. Anyway, it happened. And it was a fabulous success, you know. --- They took photographs, there was a lot of write -ups in the paper about the centenary, there was queues going around looking and reading about all the windows outside. Fantastic! And we got, we ended up with photographs with the Australian Display Society and like that and we won a number of medals and we were sent over to Melbourne, it was the first time that I got sent away by John Martins which was an all-paid stay in a hotel. Wow! That was big. But --- five years later, is when I got called to the Chairman's office and he said, "Mr Tormena." He called me 'Mr Tormena' because nobody got to talk to him unless you were at a level of director or manager or whatever.

OH: What was his role?

JT: Who?

OH: The man who called you in?

JT: Sir Edward Heywood?

OH: He was the owner?

JT: He was the John Martins. There was two brothers and one of them had died the second year I was there. Anyway, he called me up there and he says, "Mr Tormena?" He says, "Can you tell me, have you got any reasons --- or home duties? He says: "Or any reasons that you are not allowed to leave, leave home?" And I said... you know, I didn't what he was heading for. And I said, "I don't know what you mean, I've got no ties at home. I'm not married and I'm living at home." I said, "I do as I please." And he says, "Are you sure that you're not needed at home?" And I said: "No, no, I'm not." And he said, "Well, you have been chosen to travel with Mr Coles, (you saw there) and Mr Stevenson and Mr Tedson who was the draughtsman, the one who used to measure the square footage of how big a department would be according to the takings and things like that. And he says: "you'll be issued with --- a list of the places that you're going to. Mr Coles will be your boss while you're travelling and all that. The next thing I get this list, But I mean, I had no idea that it was going to be... I thought it would be a week, you know. Eleven weeks, travelling first class, being met by the world retail associations of the world with the main big department companies like Macey's in America, La Fayette in France, Sweden, Norway, Germany Takashimaya in Japan. My God, my head was spinning.

OH: And what year was this?

JT: This was 1972.

OH: Your role at that time?

JT: Was to look at what we could learn or whether John Martins was up with the rest of the world in the retail department store, you know whether we were country bumpkins or were we were. And honestly, I was rather flattered because I thought that some of the places of these big names you used to hear, we were way ahead of them.

OH: In terms of the display, design?

JT: Oh yes, in merchandise presentation. --- One very bad thing that --- the embarrassing thing that they did to me, nobody thought of it and I didn't have the guts to go up there and say anything that when we made our first stop which was Hong Kong, --- the director, Jeff Coles ordered, by the time we got to Hong Kong, it was there, a stack of call cards, for me as John

Martins representative and Merchandise Presentation Director. And I wasn't, I was the window dresser. The director was in the nervous breakdown. And that got, that I got letters when I got back, addressed in that manner, like that. And I was afraid that those people were shipping, what kind of thing did you tell them overseas, passing yourself off as a director and things like that.

OH: What was your title, you know, at John Martins?

JT: Well, by the time I left I was --- the Merchandise Presentation Director for John Martins, I've still got tickets like that, because I was in charge of the five stores for the presentation and everything like that. Seventy three people on the staff.

OH: So you did become a Director?

JT: Yes, but that was... at the time, my boss was still my boss and he didn't leave for another four years and I was getting letters back from that trip that were addressed to me as the Company Director, you know. So that was embarrassing. What was I going to do? The poor bugger that had been there, he was my boss, and he had been there since he was a teenager and I'm passing myself in a higher position than he is. --- But that was it.

OH: And the trip? You learned a lot of things?

JT: The trip was fantastic [expands the word] And after that time, the Directors, every time they sent me overseas especially if it was in Europe, they would say: "I want you to arrange the itinerary so that you end up in Rome and I want you to fix it so that, 'Johnno', he used to call me. "So that Johnno can go and see his relatives in Bigolino for a weekend before coming back." And I thought --- I couldn't believe that those things were happening to me.

OH: How many times did you go overseas

JT: Oh?

OH: With John Martins?

JT: Pardon?

OH: With John Martins?

JT: yes, yes, with John Martins.

OH: How many times?

JT: [sighs] '72 was the first one. Within seven months, I was back again and we did all the East, we went up to Taiwan, Korea, Japan, like that. And that was only for about three weeks. Another time we went through America. Where did we get there? Los Angeles, Cincinnati. We went up to Toronto, New York. Another time we went to --- when we presented, when we did that promotion called 'Mood Mediterranean' with all Mediterranean flavour, and like that, and there we went to Italy, Spain, France, Switzerland, Israel, Denmark, Copenhagen and finishing up in Singapore and Perth before coming back. Then... look I can't remember them all.

Another time that we got it in there, we went for ten days but that time we only did Phoenix, we did San Francisco, Phoenix, and New York. That was only ten days. But then again, we went later, again and did another one which we named 'Viva Italia' and that was another, with Spain and France and we did all that but it was all concentrated into the Italian goods and things like that because the Director, Jeff Coles had met the director, chamber of commerce, Italy and talked him into saying when are you got to do a promotion for Italian merchandise. Mr Coles called me up and he said, "John, I met your countryman, your Chamber of Commerce." And he said... Anyway to cut a long story short, he said, "I've accepted, I've got his full support to do an Italian promotion and you're going to put it together for me." And I thought... so I went.

OH: It seems like that with idea that you were ending up your trips, end up with your trips in

Rome so you could visit your relatives, that the directors knew that you were from an Italian family.

JT: Mmmn.

OH: And Italian background

JT: Yes.

OH: And that that was important?

JT: Well, they, didn't, they didn't get and said "Are you here again?" Yes, we were in Rome." And I said, "They're waiting for me, I've got back to Rome by Friday night because we were leaving to come back to Australia. They were fascinated that --- but, Madeleine, I was fascinated and I couldn't believe, you know, I left a little village called Bigolino at 12 years old, I only did Grade 5, I have never aimed at anything. I didn't know, I never thought of what I'd like to be or what I'd like to do. It just happened, one circumstance with another and it just happened that I go... I certainly didn't aim for it. And it happened and I thought to myself, now if we were not lucky enough to get away from Fascism before the War and I got stuck in Italy --- what turn would my life have taken? You know, what would I have done in Italy? I certainly couldn't do what Dad was doing with a couple of horses and I'm certainly not a man to work the land, I wasn't interested. I don't know what I would have liked to have done. I dreamt that I would have liked to be a pilot, to pilot a plane but it wasn't as a career, I'd like to be a pilot because I wanted to see the rest of the world [laughs] and I knew I couldn't make it there.

OH: And, it's interesting because as you talk, you obviously did get to see a lot of the world through your working life.

JT: Exactly, and this is where I think somebody up there must like me or something [laughs]

OH: I was also thinking Johnny, that you had skills that were recognised at John Martins. What do you think those skills were that were valued in the work place?

JT: [sighs] I don't know --- I don't consider myself --- I got away with it. I did some things that I'm proud that I've done, that proved successful...

OH: In display?

JT: In display, in presentation, in you know because everything had to be linked and it wasn't, it wasn't easy because you had to arrange for the presentation of, you had to work out a theme first, to start off according to the fashion that they were buying and work a theme on it and present 34 windows with it, in the city store alone, and then link with that, the advertising would work their layout and how they were going to do full pages of advertising and things like that, and I had to back that up with mannequin parades and do a stage setting with mannequin parades and things like that. And I loved it while I was doing it but I was a bundle of nerves. I used to go to bed with a thick head and I'd be awake in two or three hours, you know, worrying about is that going to happen? Is that finished? And all that sort of stuff.

OH: I'm thinking about those skills that you must have had. You must have had good creative skills and conceptual...?

JT: I don't know where they come from. I didn't because what was there in Bigolino especially in those days for me to get those things out. I loved the movies and I loved reading, I was an avid reader, I used to pick up a book and I'd get so absorbed in it because sometimes we had visitors and if I was there reading a book and they would say something and my mother would be across over there, "Oh, don't worry about him, he's in another world when he's got his head in a book." I don't know. I loved the movies, I must admit, that I picked up a lot of ideas from musicals and

settings and things like that, you know. Whether it came from there, I don't know.

OH: Art, did you like art?

JT: Art? I don't understand art --- [sighs] You mean paintings and things like that? I either like them or don't like them but I can't tell you about them, you know I hear people when they discuss art and they talk about the light and the dark and you know, I can't understand all that. I see something and I either like it or I don't like it but I can't go behind that to make a whole big write up of it. I don't know.

OH: But you must have understood colour, texture, lighting?

JT: Oh, yes, yes, I did that, you know because whenever we worked on a backdrop or something like that and I wanted something that I knew. There was years there when fashions came in in colours, say, spring, it might have been predominantly purple or whatever so you'd work on the colour purple and what background do you put on that to make that colour stand out. So I used to like that and there was times that some people I used to get on their goat because I wasn't satisfied in just presenting that item of purple on that mannequin down there on a say, paler purple at the back. I wanted that washed look to fade from one to another not just a stark one colour and a stark other colour at the back. And I'd go, "No, try a bit of this or add a bit of that other colour and don't make the brush strokes fade down, make it as if though it's been washed into and fade and all that sort of thing." I could tell it, I couldn't do it. But If I had a fella, and I had a fella that could understand exactly what I was saying, I was lucky there.

OH: You had good staff?

JT: Yes, yes.

OH: When you were in charge of the five shops?

JT: Stores.

OH: Five stores, how many people were working for you?

JT: Well, between the five stores, under my control, 73.

OH: How did you like that kind of role?

JT: I was lucky, there was only one I had because I had a fella in charge at each store and there was only one that used to give me a bit of bad time because he, see I had to also fight against the store manager of the stores and he would interfere. I'd give my instructions for what I wanted because it had to be the same for five stores so that the people could see that that was a John Martins store because it was like that in the city, it was like that at Kilkenny and it was like at that at West Lakes.

OH: What were the other two?

JT: And then the store manager would then pull rank on my staff manager down there and say, "No, no, no." He said, "But Mr Tormena told me so." And he said, "I'm the manager here now." And I'd go down there and I'd say, "Eh, what's this...?" I had to come back and argue with my superior and say, you know, "Doesn't that manager that he's my staff and you know, I'm not treading on his..." But he said: the store manager said: "I'm the store manager here and responsible for everything Yeah, but each one had a function in there, and if the top brass wants... That's why David Jones, when you go to a David Jones store, you can see that David Jones is the same all over. Myers is the same. You go to America, you know, Maceys is all the same, all that sort of thing. But some of these, I think it became an ego trip for the fella, he's just a display manager, you know.

OH: And the five stores were John Martins in the city...

JT: The first store, branch store was Kilkenny, the second one was Elizabeth, the third was Marion and the fourth was West Lakes. We were, they had bought, the company had bought land at Tea Tree Plaza because they didn't want to be exactly part of the Tea Tree Plaza complex because at the time there was that and Colonnades down south that was going up. And they knew that Myer was going to Colonnades and they didn't know where to build, they didn't fancy going to both places but they wanted to go where they didn't have competition, you know.

OH: In 1988, you retired?

JT: Yes.

OH: And what was that like?

JT: It took me four months to knock at the door of Jeff Coles that was the director that I travelled away with, to get the guts to go and say, "Jeff, I want to call it quits." It took me four months because we had such a terrific --- relationship. He never bothered me, anything that I could do, that I did, if he got a couple of phone calls that praised up the window display or something that had happened, he used to: "Johnno, good boy, we got a phone call for this or a phone call for that." Or we got a little bit in the paper that was not paid for because if you advertise you have to pay for it but if you get it... And that went on for the last what? --- fourteen years, the last 14 years of my life there was terrific because I did anything that I could do and I didn't have to fight anybody, put it like that. Because as long as the top was there and wasn't complaining and so that was terrific.

OH: Why did you want to call it quits?

JT: I would say there was two --- yeah, two things that happened at that time. John Martins got sold out and became part of the Adsteam Company²⁰ which was headed by David Jones. David Jones then came in and tried to --- how would you say it? They treated us like we were the little --- we were there at their beck and call, they would come in and ask... I used to keep a large book, I used to call it my ego book. Each promotion, I would put it in there, the ads in the paper, the photographs of the mannequin parades, photographs of the windows, the backed up, the photographs of the banner that we were hanging with each promotion that we had and the directors of David Jones came from Sydney, came over and they would pick out, and they'd have a look and "That's good." and he had had the display manager from Sydney coming along there too. I mean, there were my new bosses and anything that they'd ask, I'd tell them what we did or what we thought or whatever. But if I went back to David Jones later, and it happened and I'd ask some questions the same that they'd ask me seeing that we were working for the same company and we were... They'd look at me: "Who the hell are you? To come up and ask me things like that. You're just a John Martins bit." Then I found also, I had to submit budgets for every six months according to what the program was, how big the promotions are going to be, how much does the company want, is prepared to spend for that promotion or whatever. And Mr Coles would come in, he said: "Oh, John, your budget for the six months." he says: "\$80,000, are you going to need all that?" I said: "I don't know, it hasn't been spoken about yet. We don't know yet what programs they want to do or whatever." And I said: "Why Jeff?". He says... it turns out that David Jones would project to their, what do you call it? Their --- what do you call it?

OH: Standard?

JT: No, the company, it's made up of people that have got investments.

²⁰ Adsteam or Adelaide Steamship Company acquired substantial percentage of David Jones in 1980. In 1985, David Jones acquired 100% of John Martins & Co department stores in South Australia.

OH: Shareholders?

JT: Yes, shareholders, yes into shareholders, sorry. That they had projected that say, their takings would be so much profit for that half or that year and if they didn't reach that half, they didn't want to tell the shareholders that we couldn't reach it like that. So they'd come and take from John Martins, if you didn't spend the money and put it back into there to make them look good and then they'd be snobbish to us. And I thought I can't... And all the initiative, for me it was, because I loved the travel bit and all of that, that was taken away from me, it was all done by an unseen what do you call it in Sydney? And I thought... and on top of that, I had my mother at home going with dementia.

My sister gave up her job to look after her because she couldn't be trusted sometimes she would light a fire, the gas to cook something and she'd put a plastic thing on top of it, and she might set fire to things and I thought: "Okay, ---- why am I putting up with all this friction with David Jones?" And things like that. I mean, I don't need the money any more. I've got no mortgage, I've got a good payout. And I said, I'd give it up. I'll wait until there's a big gap between the big promotions and I wanted to do it before Christmas because I didn't want to drop it onto him at Pageant time when all the stores have got to be all glitter and tinsel and there's the Pageant and then I'm getting out and leaving him with it. Because he didn't deserve because he was very good to, you know? So, in, as I said, I kept on putting it off and I said: "I've got to make it before it gets too late, before Christmas." But it took me four months before I got the courage to knock on the door. And I went in there and he said: "What's the problem?" And I said: "Jeff, I want to call it quits." "What?" "Yeah, I want to finish off." And he got up out of his desk and he went and closed the door because the secretary was there and he didn't want her to hear apparently. He said: "Why, why? What's going on?" And I told him. And he said: "Oh no, no. Are you sure?" And he said: "Did you think about it?" And I said: "Jeff, it took me four months to get to your door." Anyway he said: "When do you want to leave?" And I said: "I'm not going to hold it onto you." I said: "You do what you think is right. I can tell you the person that I feel confident in telling you that he could take over my job. The rest is up to you." He said: "Let me think about and I'll get back to you." It went on for five or six weeks and I saw that he wasn't getting in touch with me so I had to get up the courage and go back to him again. --- Until finally, we went down there and it ended up on 14th August 1988, I finished up. And that's when a lot of those photographs were there.

OH: You took up the responsibility for your Mum at that point?

JT: Well, yes. See, I felt a bit guilty that my sister gave up her job so I said okay I'll look after her because she's always been well loved by the bosses that she worked for, they've always tried to get her back. So I said, "Tell them you can work as long as you like." And I said, "I'll fix it." I enjoyed it for a while, I enjoyed the thought of trying to cook something and make sure that everything was already for this and that. But the novelty wore off.

[laughter]

JT: And the doctor, also said that I've got to think, we've got to think of doing something for her because you think you're doing the good thing in looking after her, but --- you'll eventually suffer for it and if you get sick, then who's going to look after her? And that's when we decided to put her in a nursing home and we were lucky enough that we eventually through pursuing we got her just around the corner from us. And so I used to go up there every lunch time to feed her. Maria

used to go at teatime to feed her. And that's how it happened.

OH: When did your mother die?

JT: She died in February 1999 and she was in the nursing home for nearly five years.

OH: Just to track back, I should have asked you about the celebrations or the acknowledgement when you left John Martins because you'd been there for 28 years?

JT: Oh that was really terrific, I didn't expect it you know. All the staff that I dealt with from come in from the stores, all the maintenance people, the store managers of the stores, they gave me a big cocktail party in the restaurant of the store. It was terrific. Actually [laughs] I broke down ---

OH: I'm not surprised because you obviously loved that job.

JT: Oh I did, I loved it because as I said, because what I was doing, I got results. I know I got all tied in knots when I was working for it but once it went up and it was successful, I forgot about all that.

OH: So you had a really good working life at John Martins?

JT: Oh beautiful, beautiful. But, I equally had the same satisfaction the 14 years that I had with Foy and Gibson's too.

OH: (46:31) Ah. Johnny, I'm just going to change directions a little before we complete the interview and I'd like to ask you about your connections to the Italian community Adelaide. How has that happened for you?

JT: I didn't have much connection.

[sound of coughing]

JT: I'm not a club man. I was a foundation member with the Veneto Club, you know but that's all that I said, "Look, I'll be a foundation member", and everybody was contributing \$100 which I did and that's going back in the --- '60s when I was on only about \$40 a week and \$100 was a lot of money to give to them but I was glad to do it. But I'm not a club man, I don't play billiards and I don't play cards and I can't think of anything worse than sitting around with things like that, and I am not a sport man but my sister is, you know.

OH: So why did you give the donation at that time to the Veneto Club?

JT: Because I was from the Veneto region and people, and I know that my father would have loved it, you know, but he had been dead for years. Then I --- also put my name for my mother for *Trevisani nel Mondo*.

OH: Can you explain what *Trevisani nel Mondo* is.

JT: He organises tours with groups of Venetians, a Venetian group all over Australia, they even go, it's quite big. It's all over the Veneto people that are, I've got a book and they're in Brazil, in Switzerland, in Japan and they had annual things.

OH: This is an organisation, isn't it for people who came from the province of Treviso in the Veneto?

JT: Yes, yes.

OH: And that's where your family came from?

JT: Came from, yes. That's right.

OH: Have you maintained strong links with the cousins of, that you've known here in Adelaide?

JT: Oh, well, the closest ones, I'm friends with all of them. I mean, there's not one, I was very close with Leone Bernardi, not was, still am and they are the ones we bought a speed boat together and we used to go water skiing and things like that. But as we're getting older, we see

less of each other, you know. They're married, they've got children and they've got grandchildren and their life is taken up with them. But we see each other. Leon's wife is a champion person, champion person and she always makes a point of, she knows all our birthdays and on our birthdays, we're invited to her place for lunch. It's terrific, it's terrific.

OH: Of course, you've had many trips back to Italy and to Bigolino?

JT: Yes, apart from the ones I took from John Martins, I had, 1956 which I was away for 12 months and that's the time I went to work in London. In 1965 was the next trip that I took back and I was away for eight months there.

JT: (50:29) And that's another thing, it was after I had just been put in charge of the window display at John Martins when I put in my leaving notice, and one of the associate directors of the fashion floor found out that I was leaving and he said: "Does Mr Hayward know that you're leaving?" I said: "I don't know." And he said: "Well, don't you think you..." And I said: "Well, I told my superior that I did that. And I said: " I didn't think it was my place to go over my superior to go to the top man." And anyway, the next thing, I get a call to go up to the Hayward's office, and he said: "John, I hear you're leaving us." And I said, "Oh, yes, Mr Hayward. " And he said, "Why, aren't you happy with us?" And I said, "Yes, I'm very happy with you." And he said, "Then, why?" I said that I wanted to go back to my hometown and I think he probably misunderstood that I had business to go back to my home-town, it wasn't like that at all. And he said, "Then, aren't you going to come back to Australia?" I said, "Oh yes, my whole family is here in Adelaide. I'm only going back to the village. And he said, "What are you going to do when you come back?" And I said, " Oh, I'll be knocking at John Martins' door to see if there's an opening." [chuckles] And he said, "Oh, you're happy with us?" And I said, "I'm very happy with you here." And he had the leaving notice, and he tore it up and he said, "John, you're happy with us, we want you back. He said, "I won't accept the leaving notice. Your job as it stands today, will be open for you." And I said, "But Mr Heywood, I don't know if I'm going to be away for three months, four months, six months." "Whenever you decide", he says, "Drop me a line and your job will be open." I couldn't believe it, I couldn't believe it, I said, "What more could you ask?"

OH: Mr Hayward and other people obviously thought you were a very good, reliable, creative worker.

JT: Yes, that was possibly only a couple of people I tried to avoid because I --- they were, I don't know, I got along with 99 per cent of the staff and managers and all of that. There was a couple of old wives but more difficult. I don't know if they were testing me to see if I, or they thought that I had more --- what? More influence with top brass and I didn't. If anything, there was some times that I used to sit down for morning tea and a couple of the directors would come down for morning tea and they would come and sit at my table and I was always --- nervous because I used to see other managers sitting around looking over at us whether they thought that I was a bit of a crawler, sort of thing and they used to tell me dirty jokes and I never knew how far I could go telling them another one back. [laughs]

OH: (54:12) Johnny, we're bringing the interview to a close but I'd like to ask you what does your Italian heritage means to you today?

JT: --- I can't imagine myself begin anything else, I've never thought of it. I'm equally as proud of my Italian heritage as I am of being in Australia because when I go to Italy, I keep on talking

about Australia. "You are talking about Australia, go back." I've been lucky in life, been lucky with health, and I've been lucky with my life here -- I just hope that I can arrive to my final days feeling the same.

OH: Well, I think that's a lovely note on which to end. So thank you very much Johnny for the interview.

JT: My pleasure.

OH: For contributing to the project.

JT: Okay, my pleasure.